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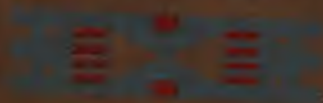


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ARIZONA



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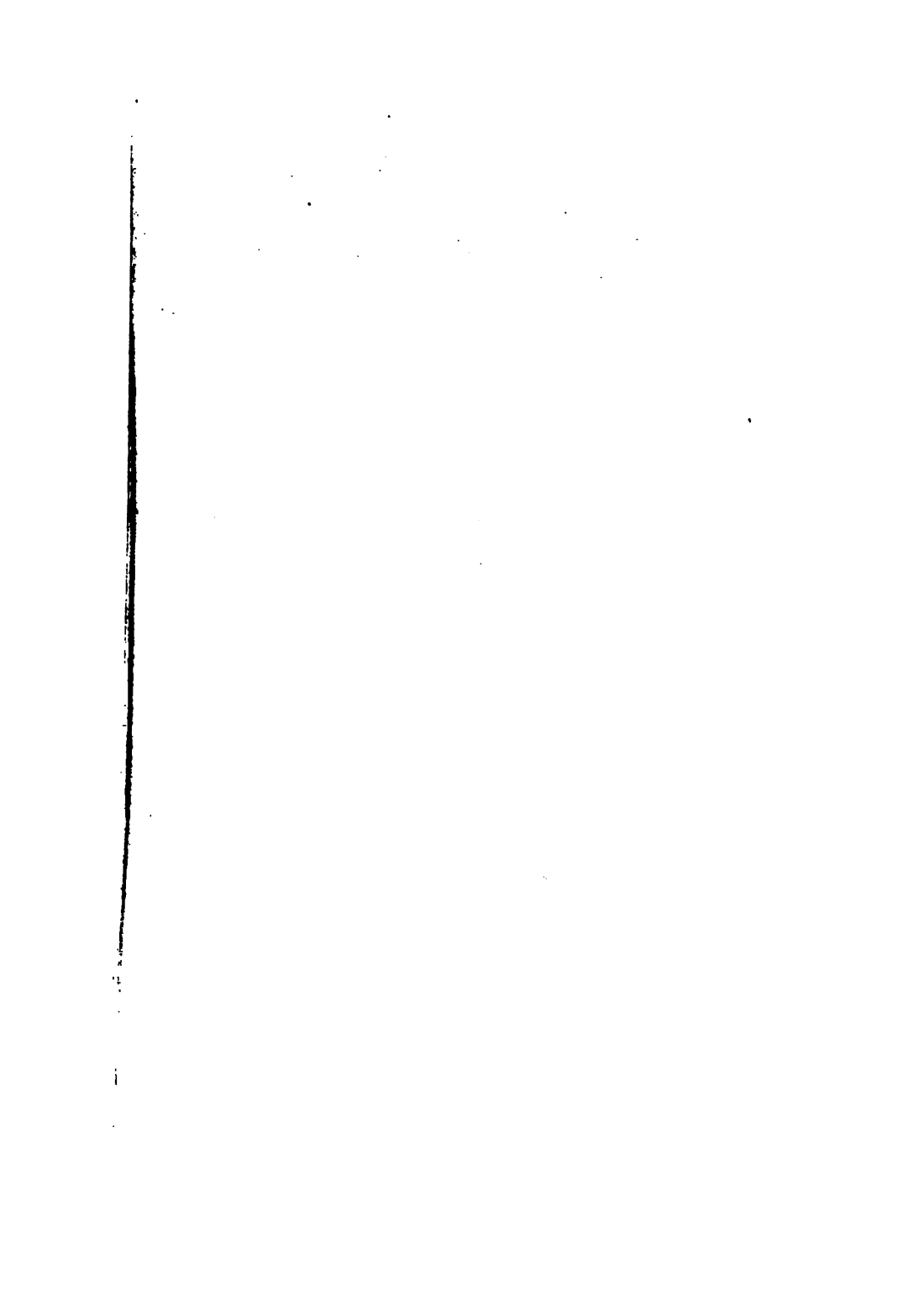
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ARIZONA



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THE NOTE OF DESTINY.

ARIZONA

A Romance of the Great Southwest

BY

AUGUSTUS THOMAS

MADE INTO A BOOK FROM THE
PLAY OF THE SAME NAME BY
CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
J. N. MARCHAND

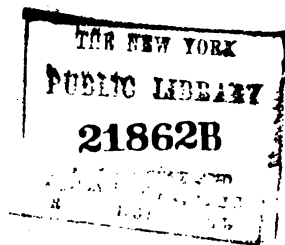


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I DEDICATE WHATEVER SHARE OF THIS BOOK MAY
PROPERLY BE CALLED MY OWN
TO
THAT STERLING ACTOR AND GENTLEMAN
HARRY LEIGHTON
WHOM I AM PROUD TO CALL MY FRIEND

W Q R 19 FEB '36

P R E F A C E

THIS is now the second time that I have attempted to take another man's creations who had played their part upon the stage and make them go through their paces in the pages of a book. The work, I must admit, is not hard. It is all cut out for you. You are simply an observer. You play the part of the ancient Greek Chorus, as it were. It is somewhat monotonous work, though; for a decent regard for the rights of the real author prevents you from taking liberties with his people. You can not be so ill-bred as to put things in their mouths according to your own fancy. You can not be the *deus ex machina* of the plot and arrange matters in accordance with your own will.

All this is a prelude to saying that this story is not told by me but by Mr. Thomas. There is as much of him and as little of me in the book as I could manage and still have it a book, where everything had to be set down on the printed page rather than acted on the public stage.

They say I am too much of a preacher to depict a consistent villain. By that they mean that most of my villains get reformed or reform themselves

PREFACE

in the last chapter. I know one I drew who did not follow that law, but I must admit that sorry exception only proves the rule. Mr. Thomas made Captain Hodgman a thorough blackguard, and with the best will in the world I could not alter his character or do anything with him but let him die with the lie by which he sought to involve Denton in ruin, on his lips. Please remember that he is Mr. Thomas' villain, however, not mine, and I reluctantly perceive that the necessities of the drama allowed him no place for repentance.

Well, in spite of its limitations, it has been a rather pleasant task after all. Since it is not my story, I can say I enjoyed it as a story, and with the expression of the hope that you may do the same, I leave the issue with you, gentle reader.

CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY.

MOUNT VERNON, NEW YORK,
October, 1913.

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BOOK I
THE ARAVAIPA RANCH
YOUTH AND LIGHT HEARTS

CHAPTER I

*In which Colonel Bonham and Mr. Henry Canby
discuss Mint Juleps and various phases of
Matrimony*

THERE was something between Colonel Franklin K. Bonham and his father-in-law, Henry Canby. Whether that which interposed was a cause for congratulation or the reverse, depended upon the point of view. A certain worthy temperance society would have come to one conclusion; typical Kentucky, let us say, to another possibly. So far as the two gentlemen themselves were concerned they both had a vivid appreciation of, to say nothing of a warm welcome for, what stood on the separating table between them. To puzzle the reader no longer, there was a smell of fresh mint in the warm, pleasant evening air; mint in glasses in which ice, rare and precious commodity in Arizona, tinkled musically in alluring invitation; ice floating in liquid compounds whose seductive fragrance mingled in delectable harmony with the breath of the piquant plant. In short, between the rancher and his military son-in-law stood two carefully compounded, scientifically

blended, altogether delicious mint juleps, which the two gentlemen were discussing through long straws; delicately, reposefully, lingeringly, as became two connoisseurs who had arrived at the same critical view point, although through quite different courses of training.

The glasses were not cut nor was the table from which their owners took them polished mahogany. Both would have been out of place under the circumstances. But the juleps would have lent distinction to the rarest crystal of Venice, or the richest mahogany of San Domingo.

Colonel Bonham, hot and tired still, had ridden in that afternoon from the camp of one of his troops of cavalry which had been out at San Carlos for a week on a practice march and camp — a dusty, tiresome “hike.” With full genuine hearty Western hospitality, the big rancher had welcomed him, not only as all Western men did but as a relative by marriage as well. Colonel Bonham had ridden on ahead of the command for other purposes than refreshments, although he was too good a soldier ever to discount those entirely. He had wanted very much to see his young wife again after the brief absence which had yet seemed so long to him. Still he was too old a campaigner to be indifferent to such oppor-

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tunities as Canby's hospitality opened before him. Besides, Estrella, his wife, Canby's oldest daughter, had retired for the afternoon and was probably asleep by now, and the brusque soldier, all tenderness and consideration where women and especially his wife were concerned, refused to interfere with her usual habit merely to gratify his own longing for her society.

The mint julep was his compensation. He was doing the best he could without her, therefore. The Canby mint juleps were famous in the Aravaipa Valley. Sam Wong must have been a reincarnation of some bygone spirit which had ranged to the southward of Mason and Dixon's line, otherwise his deftness as a mint julep mixer and eke a cocktail compounder, was unexplainable. In fact, "the boys" christened Sam's efforts in those directions, "Chink Juleps," or "Chink Cocktails," as the case might be, vowing that there were none better. Old Canby himself had initiated Sam into the first principles of the art, but the celestial soon surpassed his master — no mean compliment that.

It was cool and pleasant in the big walled-in courtyard of the ranch. The "dobe" house, whose plain exterior gave no promise of its comfortable even luxurious interior, lay sprawling

irregularly off to the north side. The out-buildings, the bunk house, the stables, confronted the dwelling on the other side. The enclosing wall was a relic of the days when every ranch house was of necessity a fort. It surrounded alike dwelling, stables, wagon sheds and other structures, because horses formerly meant lives and the Apaches would almost as soon have stolen a horse as have killed a man. Indeed, there were horse thieves still in the territory, against whom it was necessary to guard.

The Aravaipa ranch took in most of the valley and old Henry Canby dominated it with his cluster of walled buildings as a feudal baron in his castle might have lorded it over his domain. Midway between the two main groups of buildings, a huge opening had been cut in the wall. Massive posts bordered this entrance and from them heavy wooden gates swung; on this evening as in general, hospitably wide open. Through this opening you could see the whole extent of the long valley. It was well watered for Arizona by a brook that came tearing out of the mountains that bordered the horizon on the farther side, only to meander with growing sluggishness through the lowlands, affording good pasture and plenty of drink to the cattle save in the extreme of the

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dry seasons. The mountain ranges swept around and could be seen from the courtyard not only through the gate but over the low tops of the wall and buildings. One peak, loftier than the rest and miles away, glistened snow-capped in the declining sunshine. The others exhibited the wonderful colours, the browns, the yellows, the dull reds, the misty faded blues, of that wonderful land.

Colonel Bonham and his father-in-law were much nearer in age than such a relationship usually implies and they were much more congenial on that account. The big, powerful, splendid rancher was verging upon sixty. Colonel Bonham, to his youthful wife's great annoyance, frankly and truthfully admitted to fifty-two. Beside him, Estrella was a mere child. Thirty years lay between them — a wide gap and a hard one to bridge!

Soldiers, like sailors in every port, are apt to have a sweetheart at every post. The gentle god might be in more appropriate costume when he visited army posts if he were adorned with a few brass buttons, since they are among his most potent means of charming maidens. But Colonel Bonham was different. As the years of his youth and manhood had passed and no woman had taken

his fancy he had become accustomed to saying that his bride was the Army, a rough spouse to be sure. He had finally declared that he was wedded to his profession. He had assured himself that he would never marry and rested content in that belief.

Men have made that declaration before. They have fancied themselves immune to the love germ, but the active little bacillus — how far we have advanced scientifically beyond ancient times, from Cupid's arrows to bacteria! — had at last laid them low. The last state of such men is usually worse than the first. They take it harder because of their long immunity. Although he concealed it, was shy about it even in his heart, Colonel Bonham was passionately devoted to his beautiful young wife whom, by a miracle he could not explain, he had seen, loved and conquered! Neither the extent nor the intensity of that devotion had been nor were yet appreciated by Estrella Canby, who had found it difficult also to explain how she had come to marry her elderly soldier lover.

While he was old for a husband, he was young for a colonel as rank was attained in the then slowly promoted American army. In command of the famous cavalry regiment of which he was

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so proud and far from department headquarters, the Colonel was the most important person for miles around. There had been a spice of satisfaction to her pride in that she had won this confirmed old bachelor who was really intensely likable even if not exactly calculated to stimulate a grand passion in so young a woman's heart. Yes, that had been it, doubtless. And there had been nobody else — then.

Colonel Bonham's good sense had told him that he was taking a risk in marrying so young a woman and one who did not, he felt, rise to the measure of his own passion. I do not refer to the ordinary risk in matrimony but one superadded thereto when age allies itself with youth. The Colonel fondly hoped that rank, position, supremacy, coupled with his own adoration, might limit the risk and that Estrella, appreciating all that he could offer her and his sterling worth as well, for he was one of the noted soldiers of the army, would not allow her thoughts to answer the call of youth. Finally, he rested his hope on the probability that his own great passion could not fail to kindle a like fire in the young wife's heart. All of which goes to show that men not only believe what they wish to believe, but hope for what they wish to hope for.

For the rest, in no respect did Colonel Bonham look his age. He did not measure his girth in inches by his years. His figure was still tall, spare, of almost slender proportions. His eye was as bright and his cheek as ruddy as it had been when he left West Point. His face was weather-beaten, to be sure, but not wrinkled. He could ride, he could shoot, he could endure, with any man in the regiment. His age only showed itself in his hair which was quite white. Estrella described it as "prematurely grey," but the Colonel honestly could not indulge her in that feminine fancy.

That was about the only thing in which the Colonel did not indulge his young wife to the very limit, by the way. He would not pass himself off as younger than he was, he would not even allow any one to draw a wrong inference from his appearance. He told his age uncompromisingly, perhaps with a sort of pride in the obvious fact that so old a man as he had won the sweetest, prettiest girl in Arizona — unless her sister, Bonita, might dispute the title — from all the young men in the regiment to say nothing of the young ranchmen in the territory.

For all his somewhat brusque, gruff manner, his natural old-army autocratic habit of command, the

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Colonel had a fine vein of humour. He could be a genial companion if he would. He was a good story teller, his officers admired him and respected him, his men adored him, his friends swore by him. He had what was universally conceded to be the finest regiment of cavalry in the army, and the happiest and most contented, although he ruled it with an iron hand. Estrella had been rather afraid of that iron hand but she had never felt its weight. Her fears had been groundless.

Old Henry Canby was a keen judge of men, a careful observer thereof. Little things were indicative. It seemed to him there was a forced note in the Colonel's response to his raillery that evening; the ranchman thought he detected a shade of disappointment on the soldier's brow. The Colonel was evidently preoccupied, although he was equally evidently determined not to show it. He had made no comment when Estrella left him after the briefest of greetings to go and lie down except to prevent her father from remonstrating with her, which Canby had immediately declared his intention of doing when he came in later and learned of her action. And that itself somewhat aroused the suspicions of the older man. He said nothing further, however; hopeful that the juleps — which things he himself had found help-

ful in driving dull care away on occasion — might be efficacious.

The Colonel finished his julep some time before the rancher negotiated his, which undue haste added to the suspicions of the older man. The soldier sat staring down the valley in silence, his hand resting on the table, while Canby with lingering and appreciative deliberation extracted the very last drop from his deep glass with his long straw. The first julep obviously having failed to cheer up his companion, the older man concluded that a second might be more potent. When it came to juleps, or almost any drink, Canby was a firm believer in the truth of the old proverb about "the hair of the dog that bit you."

"Colonel," he began with large and expansive geniality, "have another."

Colonel Bonham started as if suddenly aroused from deep thought, looked around at his companion, smiled and answered with certain deprecating hesitation.

"No-o — I think not."

"Oh, if you only *think* so —" said Canby in his bluff way, emphasising the verb. He turned his head toward the house. "Sam," he called loudly.

"They're just a trifle strong for me you know," said the Colonel with definite hesitation and yet

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not enough to enable his reply to qualify as a downright refusal.

"Strong?" snorted the surprised Canby as the Chinese boy appeared on the porch. "Sam, fix up two more of these," he said to the latter, holding up his glass; "an' don't put quite so much whiskey in the Colonel's. These army men, you know, can't stand what ain't much more'n milk to us tough old ranchers."

He winked to the Chinaman and cunning Sam winked back.

"Yes, sir," he said in his pigeon English, coming down and taking the glasses and going into the house.

"Now, Canby," continued the Colonel slightly less deprecatingly and this time in an explanatory mood, "I really oughtn't to take another one."

"Nonsense!" blurted out the ranchman.

"It has been a year," said the officer, striving to keep regret out of his voice, "since I have even had a smell of mint."

"A year!" exclaimed Canby.

"Well, I haven't the dates but it seems like that."

The rancher laughed.

"I understand," he said. "I'll do up a bundle of it for you an' you can take it back to the Post."

"No, no," said the Colonel. "I couldn't use it at the Post possibly."

Canby spread his arms out on the table and stared at his companion in great astonishment.

"Well, if you can't find a place for a bundle of mint in a regiment of United States cavalry," he began, "I'd like to know where on God's earth you —"

"Oh, they'd like it all right. I could doubtless use up a bale of it in the regiment without difficulty but it is a bad example in the Colonel and —"

"You never used to feel that way about it, Bonham," said Canby wonderingly. "What's got into you?"

"It's different now. You see Estrella —"

"Ah," said the older man, a great light dawning upon him, "that's it."

"Yes, that's it. She kicks if I get off the water wagon too frequently."

"But great heavens —"

"So she keeps me straight, you see." The Colonel threw back his head and laughed. "Once she said this nose of mine commenced to get little blue railroad maps on it; had to paint it with bismuth to satisfy her. If she scents liquor

anywhere, she pretends they are coming back and —”

“ I see,” said Canby, nodding. “ I know that girl. I’ve knowed her longer than you have, you recollect. She used to put a crimp in my medicines by throwin’ the same sort of scare into me.”

“ Well, what did you do about it? ”

“ In the first place, I didn’t let it interfere. Wimmen are wimmen but when it comes to sayin’ how many mint juleps a man should drink, I —”

He stopped suddenly, hearing some one hustling about in the house hard by. The Colonel laughed.

“ You’d better halt there,” he said meaningly.

“ Yes, I guess so,” laughed the older man.

“ Well, when Estrella got too emphatic I used to pretend to like it. I used to shine up my horn this way.” He took hold of his nose with one hand and proceeded to polish it vigorously with the other, at least he went through the motions.

“ I did that every time she begun to lecture me. Why don’t you try something like that yourself? ”

“ You must remember,” answered the Colonel, “ that, although I am old enough to be, I am not her father but her husband.”

“ Yes, I suppose that does make a difference. Now if it were Ma —”

"I reckon you would toe out a little more yourself."

"That's so," returned the rancher. "I guess I would. A woman that is married to a fellow has got a pretty tight cinch on him — that is, if he likes her."

The old man's voice softened. The footsteps within sounded distinctly pleasant to him.

"I confess," said the Colonel, smiling, "that I do like Estrella," which was quite true. Men may like without loving and love without liking. The Colonel did both. It was his misfortune that Estrella did but one. "She is really great, Governor," he went on, moved to unwonted frankness by the trend of the conversation. "You are her father and ought to know her but — well, she is a brick."

"Colonel, at her age, they are all pretty good, you know. Leastways, that's my recollection, an' when one of 'em happens to marry a man that is sort o'—" he hesitated, "settled—" he added delicately.

"Or even grey-headed," said the Colonel, removing his cap and throwing it down on the steps of the porch.

"Yep," answered Canby, nodding, "he is pretty sure to be just a little dotty about her."

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"Do you think I'm 'dotty' about Estrella?" asked Bonham, flushing a little and wondering if he had gone too far.

To his natural reticence was added the reserve of his years and he did not like this frank comment though he admitted that he had made the opening.

"Dotty?" roared Canby, oblivious to the uneasiness of his companion. "Oh, no, certainly not. You are —"

"Well, how do I show it?" interrupted the Colonel.

"Why, by ridin' down here for instance. Why didn't you stay with the troop and come later?"

"Well, I came early to avoid the heat. There was no necessity for me remaining and —"

"Oh, all right. That excuse is about as good as any other, I reckon. Have it your own way an'— Ah, here are the juleps. Be sure you give the innocent one to the Colonel, Sam," continued the rancher, with a rough jocularly which was increasingly jarring to his guest, as the boy appeared with the brimming glasses.

Sam placed the juleps solemnly before the two gentlemen as he might a votive offering before his joss and retired.

"Juleps are good for — heat," said Canby, picking up the nearest glass.

"Yes, that is true," said the Colonel, taking his glass. "I really oughtn't to do it but —"

"I suppose," continued Canby after a preliminary sip, "if Estrella hadn't been here you would have rode here jest the same — to avoid the heat?"

"No," returned the Colonel who was nothing if not honest, "probably I wouldn't have done that."

"Oh, pshaw!" said Canby. "You'd been a week at Carlos an' you was simply honin' to get back, an' if you want a frank answer to that question you asked — which you git whether you do or not an' everybody alike from me — you're jes' naturally 'dotty' about her, plumb crazy. Ain't that so?"

Colonel Bonham set down his glass and stared out over the valley. Canby said nothing, being busy drinking.

"Well?" he resumed when he stopped, not because he had finished his glass but because he wanted to draw out the process.

"You don't understand," said the Colonel moodily.

Canby shot a keen glance at him but thought it

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well not to take more notice of the other's mood. He laughed again but not quite so spontaneously as before.

"You're starting a little late to learn me."

"To tell the truth," said the Colonel, "I must be a little careful about Estrella."

"Careful?"

"Yes, because there is — something wrong."

He had rather to wrench the words out, for speech on such matters as the relationship between him and his wife did not come easy to him, not even to her father.

"Wrong?" exclaimed Canby, now thoroughly interested.

The Colonel rose, took a step nearer the house, turned about, surveyed the courtyard as if to make sure that no one was within earshot.

"She isn't happy," he said at last.

"Git out," exclaimed Canby, staring up at him incredulously.

"I mean it," said the Colonel, stepping to the table and confronting him.

"She's been here a whole week an' I never saw her chipperer in my life," returned the ranchman convincingly.

"Yes," admitted the Colonel meaningly; "I was away."

"Well?" asked Estrella's father.

The Colonel lifted his hand with a little gesture which told a good deal.

"You don't mean that made her chipperer?" asked his companion.

"Yes, I do mean just that," answered the Colonel.

"Why?" asked her father tersely.

"Because she isn't happy at the Post."

"Well, you ain't the Post, are you?"

"I'm her husband."

Canby's brow corrugated. He was evidently thinking hard. Mechanically, his glance comprehended the Colonel's glass.

"Ain't the julep brewed proper?" he said half unconsciously, playing for time.

"Oh," said the Colonel, "I had forgot it."

And that was a sure sign to the older man of something untoward, for he had enough of the South in his make-up never to forget a julep like that.

The Colonel lifted his glass mechanically and after a taste of the julep he went on,

"I'd think, maybe, she was lonesome for her own people but most of her life was spent away at school and at 'Frisco."

THE ARAVAIPA RANCH 21

Canby's brow cleared. He rose and turned and began to walk up and down.

"Colonel," he said, "I have been in this ranch business a long time. I've broke a good many colts in my time, not many men in Arizona more. I've broke lots to go double, too — lots of 'em. When you first yoke 'em up, they jes' whip-saw this way and that way." Canby held his arms out in front of him and moved them violently back and forth. "They ain't never both layin' agin the tugs at the same time. Then I give 'em the gaff, an' after they've run themselves near to a standstill, I point 'em home. Sometimes I have to do it more'n once but eventually they pulls together like the wheelers in a band wagon. Humans is like horses, specially females."

Bonham smiled but shook his head at the rough yet pertinent illustration.

"But I am no colt, you remember."

"For all your white hairs you are at gittin' married. All new married folks is jest the same. Believe me, I speak from observation an' experience. For awhile, whip-saw an' bolt. Some bolt harder an' more often than others but they all of 'em do it an' then —"

"Well," said the Colonel tersely, but with a much deeper interest back of the question than

he expressed in words or manner, "are Estrella and I whip-sawing or — bolting?"

Canby came back and sat down at the table again.

} "I take it you're boltin'. I got eyes in my head an' I love my daughter an' I've got your interest at heart. I've been watchin' you. Each of you thinks that if you could run a little faster, you could git away from the other. Now, that don't mean trouble," he said emphatically to the anxious colonel; "it simply means you ain't quite used to your double harness yet."

CHAPTER II

How Bonita Canby Played Joan-of-Arc to "C Troop" to her Mother's Most Decided Displeasure

ANY further comments upon the situation which might have sprung from the shrewd mind of the keenly observant and philosophic ranchman were checked by the arrival of his own matrimonial yokefellow, for at this moment the portly form of Mrs. Canby hove in view, literally filling the doorway opening from the hall on to the porch. The lady held in her hand a pair of huge field glasses which she extended rather threateningly toward her husband. How much of the conversation she had overheard was not evident. But there was a note of sharpness in her voice as she recalled her discerning partner to himself.

"Henry," she began in the feminine imperative — and possessive! — of a long and lawfully wedded wife.

"Hello, Mother," answered Canby with suspicious geniality, starting toward her as he spoke.

"I've been lookin' out of the window at that

cavalry troop through this spy glass of the Colonel's. You can see it now comin' down the valley if you look around the gate."

"Ma jest loves soldiers," said Canby, winking at the Colonel with elephantine playfulness.

"Git out," said Mrs. Canby, severely reprehensive of such pleasantries. "I been watching for Bonita."

"Oh," returned her husband carelessly, "Bonita's all right. That girl can take care of herself anywhere. She'll turn up at—"

"She went out at three and it is after six now," interrupted the lady.

"Well, what of it?"

"And jest as I thought," said Mrs. Canby, raising the field glass to her eyes once more and staring through the open gateway way down the valley, "she's gallivanted up the valley to meet the troop."

Canby's eyes twinkled.

"Well, we ain't never hung anybody hereabouts for that yet, have we?" he asked genially.

"But to think of one girl herdin' with forty soldiers all afternoon," urged Mrs. Canby. "I tell you —"

"Why, bless your soul, Mother," broke in the Colonel, who had been an interested listener to

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the conversation, "she's Estrella's sister and any one of them would let Bonita walk on him if she wanted to."

Mrs. Canby was an intensely practical woman. She took things literally whenever she could. And she was in no humour for badinage.

"I don't see how that helps any," she said severely. "Jest imagine her walking on one of 'em."

Utterly disregarding of her husband's broad grin and the Colonel's less pronounced amusement, she came down from the porch and walked over to the gate, through which she stared again at the approaching troop. The dust that it kicked up was now visible to the naked eye. She was obviously perturbed and anxious.

"Colonel," said the rancher, "Ma won't stand for any poetry, you see."

"Poetry," sniffed Mrs. Canby, throwing a backward glance of disdain at her husband. "I was a girl myself in this territory once."

"Well, nothin' happened to you that you couldn't git over, did they?"

Mrs. Canby folded her arms and turned slowly and surveyed her husband.

"Well," she said after a long glare, "I'll leave it to anybody that knows you."

Mechanically, Mr. Canby seized his big nose with one hand and began that polishing process with the other to which he usually resorted in such contingencies.

"Stop that," cried his spouse snappishly. "Whenever he begins that tom-fool dido, you kin know that Henry's had his full gauge," she said to the Colonel, and then to her husband: "How many mint juleps have you had, Henry Canby?"

"Colonel," said Canby abjectly but adroitly, "she always jackets me up when either of the girls steps over a trace."

He had very judiciously escaped a direct answer to this leading question by giving his wife's thoughts another direction.

"Well, somebody's responsible for 'em," said Mrs. Canby stoutly, "an' I know it ain't me."

"You see," continued the rancher, "Ma's made out somehow that it's my fault they weren't boys."

Mrs. Canby, wishing this argument to go no further, now exercised a woman's privilege of changing the conversation abruptly.

"Where's Estrella?" she asked.

"Layin' down," answered her husband.

"Well, I think she might be doin' better when

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the Colonel's rode nearly all night to spend the day with her. She ought to be out here."

"Oh, no, no," said the Colonel in swift deprecation. "Estrella usually takes a nap in the afternoon at the Post. I wouldn't have her—"

But what he would not have her do was left unsaid, for at that moment the young lady herself came through the doorway, crossed the porch and descended the steps to the table, whereupon her husband immediately rose to his feet. Estrella Bonham had certainly been lying down, if her dress spoke truly, for she was charmingly attired in a loose flowing negligée, laced and be-ribboned daintily and quite out of keeping with her mother's plain old-fashioned garment and the rude surroundings of the ranch. She yawned slightly behind her dainty white hand as if she had not had enough sleep or as if she had not quite awakened.

"Hello, everybody," she said lightly.

"H'm," said Mrs. Canby, showing her displeasure in her face and manner; "are you up for the day, Estrella?"

"Yes, and for all night, if it's half as pretty as last night."

She stepped to the side of the big colonel, slipped her arm around his shoulders and kissed

him lightly on the cheek — just such a friendly kiss as she might have given her father, by the way.

"Get a nice little nap, sweetheart?" asked the Colonel, squeezing her free hand.

"Not much of a one, Frank," answered his wife, yawning again. "I was reading most of the time. Has C Troop come?"

"Not yet," replied her husband.

Mrs. Canby had gone to the gateway again and was making vigorous play with her glasses.

"They're in plain sight," she said, "and as I live Bonita's Joan-of-Arc-in' 'em up this way."

"Oh, what fun!" exclaimed Estrella. "I'd have gone with her if I had only known it. Frank —" Her eyes fell on the table. She saw the two telltale glasses. "What have you been drinking, sir?" she asked with pretty, playful sternness.

"Er — I believe it was a — er mint julep," admitted the Colonel singularly confused — he who could face a regiment or an army without a quiver!

He glanced warningly at his father-in-law. Estrella shook her finger at him.

"You mustn't let Pa get you into bad habits."

"Of course," said the rancher, "she knows whose fault it was." He grabbed his nose and

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began polishing it again. Mrs. Canby had turned just in time to see it.

"Stop it," she cried irascibly, the sight always filling her with angry resentment.

"We've been drowndin' our sorrows, both bein' married men, the Colonel and me," said Canby and then, as was his way, he plunged at once *in medias res*. "He's got an idea, Estrella, that you ain't easy an' happy down at the Post."

Estrella's eyes opened very wide at this as if the very idea were preposterous, but it was with a certain confusion and constraint that an acute observer would have noticed that she answered. Fortunately the Colonel had for a moment looked away from her.

"Why, I don't see where he got such an idea as that, I —"

The Colonel rose, slipped his arm about her waist.

"Thought you were a trifle moody, dear," he said apologetically; "thought you were getting a little homesick for the city or —"

"Why, no," protested his girl wife, "not at all."

"Well," snorted Mrs. Canby, "any woman that could git lonesome at the Post with all those men around deserves it. Huh. You ought to

have a dose of this place — cactus and sand, and slab-sided cattle, and havin' to let the clock run down to tell when it's Sunday. And if you ain't satisfied, I don't know what women want now-a-days."

Canby was bursting with wrathful retort when the Colonel tactfully interposed, seeking to create a diversion as it were and give Canby time to recover his temper and composure.

"Maybe they want husbands like C Troop's first lieutenant, young, handsome —"

What further qualifications might have been adduced can not be known, for Estrella laid her pretty fingers over her husband's lips.

"Stop, stop," she said playfully. "I won't hear you."

"You see, as soon as I got this girl for my very own I log-rolled a transfer down here in the desert, where she can't possibly escape from me."

"Look here," said Canby wrathfully, "I suppose I've got to take it from my wife, but I won't stand your calling this place a desert."

"I am only quoting Estrella," urged the Colonel in his defence. "She said that when our orders came."

"But I didn't know how pretty Fort Grant

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could be. I thought it would be like this, you see," explained the young woman.

"The Post is pretty, I'll admit, but it isn't like San Francisco, is it, dear?" continued her husband.

"I don't think of San Francisco. I don't care for —"

"Well, I should hope not," said Mrs. Canby. "San Francisco's got all it can answer for. You ain't been anything but faint-and-fall-in-it since you left the place, and Bonita wouldn't touch a darnin' bag with a ten-foot pole since they San Francisco-ed her. Ain't either of you done an honest day's work for —"

"Well, they don't have to, Ma," interrupted Canby. "What's the money for if it ain't white bread to the girls? I don't want 'em to work."

"Well, it might be a little more white bread for me too," said Mrs. Canby resentfully. "I seem to have just as much to do as ever."

"Why, you just make yourself work, Ma," expostulated her big husband.

"Make myself work?" she exclaimed in contempt as she threw a fiery look at her liege lord.

"Wouldn't you think it was nothin' but crackers an' water for her?" said Canby, turning to the Colonel. "An' she's got finery enough

in those rooms to sink a ship. They's a diamond breast pin as big as a padlock, a gold bracelet so thick that the greasers don't steal it 'cause they think it's brass. There's silk dresses and —"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mrs. Canby, "and greasers are all they are to show 'em to. I ain't been out to show my breast pin but once in five years, and that was to the operry at El Paso."

"Now, Ma," said Canby, "you know you wore it on the sleepin'-car that time we went to Phoenix."

"Yes," admitted his aggrieved wife, "but we was the only people in the car besides the nigger."

"Well, I saw him lookin' at it mighty hard. You certainly did excite his admiration an'—"

"Mrs. Canby," said a neatly dressed young woman, coming out of the house, a pale, delicate girl, of German extraction evidently, who was part protégée and part hired girl and who assisted Mrs. Canby in the necessary work of the house.

"Yes? What is it, Lena?"

"The troop is up to the fence now. They're just coming through the gate in double column."

"Why, so they are," said Mrs. Canby, turning back to the gate. "I don't need no glasses to see 'em now."

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"How do you do, Lena?" said the Colonel, turning and smiling pleasantly at the girl.

"I'm well, thank you, sir," answered Lena, hanging her pretty blond head.

"Shake hands."

Lena gave an embarrassed little laugh, shook hands feebly and went back into the house.

"Is she all right now?" asked the Colonel, turning to his hostess.

"I can't say that. She's not strong enough to do much work. She's acting as kind of a lady's maid for Bonita. Another thing she had to have since she went to 'Frisco. I've dressed myself for all these years —"

"With some assistance from me, Ma," said the rancher, "with buttons and hooks down your back."

"Assistance from you," said his wife. "You never got it right two times out of ten. Now Bonita's got to have a maid."

"It's too bad about Lena," said the Colonel gravely. "She'd have made some fine man a good wife."

"In Arizona, my boy," said Canby sagely, "you'll find she's worth a whole hatful of dead ones yet."

"I hope so. Well, since C Troop is here," said the Colonel, "I'll put on my blouse and freshen up."

"Henry," said Mrs. Canby after the Colonel disappeared.

"Well, Ma?"

"You go and put on your coat, too."

"Why?" asked Canby with mingled disgust and resignation, knowing that he had to obey in the end but not ready for a surrender without an argument. "They don't have to salute me."

"You don't look decent in your shirt sleeves with Bonita around, and those young fellows."

"You bet. Every day is Sunday when the soldiers come around," said Canby, going into the house.

"Now, Estrella," said Mrs. Canby, having thus disposed of one problem, "you've got to stop mopin'. You made your bed and you've got to lie in it."

"Did I make it?" asked Estrella meaningly.

"Yes, you did," answered her mother. "You, could 'a' had most any in Arizona — in the army, or out of it."

"Oh, could I?"

"Yes, you could."

"What about Thompson?"

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"He was fast. That's what — fast," replied the elder woman with aggressive emphasis.

"And there was a row, wasn't there, when young Burgess began calling?"

"Well, as for him, he was no man at all. All upper lip, and no chin, just like a prairie dog."

"Oh, yes," said Estrella wearily, "they were all wrong to you except the Colonel."

"Well, I'll leave it to you; wasn't he the best of the whole kit and boodle of them?"

"Did I say he wasn't?" urged the daughter desperately. "Am I making any complaint?" she continued. She raised her voice as the jingle of horses and sabres became louder.

"Well, you act like it, I must say. And he notices it, too. He spoke of it to your father to-day. He rode nearly all night to get here, and then you sleep all day."

"I saw him when he came, didn't I? I always take a nap in the afternoon."

"You certainly do," admitted the older woman, at no pains to conceal her displeasure, "but you didn't learn that habit from me."

"And the troop will be here to-night and I'll have to be up late and —"

"Why?" interrupted the mother. "Your Pa an' me can do the entertainin' and you can go

to bed. Jes' don't you fret so much about that troop. And while we're about it, Estrella, let's understand one another. I'm a plain woman, I've got eyes in my head. I can see what happened. There ain't goin' to be no goin's-on with this Captain Hodgman this time, not here."

Her mother leaned forward and tapped the table emphatically. Estrella looked at her a moment. Her face paled a little, a bitter retort trembled on her lips. She controlled herself, however, and decided that the best way to settle the situation and close the discussion was to assume a manner which her mother especially disliked. She shrugged her shoulders and turned away, apparently languidly indifferent in spite of the fact that the chance shot had sped straight to the centre of the target — her heart.

"Your talk bores me, Mother. I wish —"

"Well, I make it jes' the same," persisted the other woman in stern anger. "You're flighty about Captain Hodgman, while the Colonel's always harping on young Denton. I wonder if there's any one else?" She turned away and walked to the gate, adding as a final shot, "You've got the best man in the regiment, the boss of all of 'em and don't you get frisky with the others or —"

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The tramping of horses and the approach of the troop was much nearer now. Suddenly a clear voice outside broke in with an order.

"Right front into line!"

As the command reached them the Colonel came into the courtyard in uniform. He walked over to his wife, who stood leaning upon the gate-post, looking down the slight declivity at the soldiers of the troop.

"How do the men look, dearie?" he asked.

"Halt," cried the officer in command outside.

"Very well," answered Estrella, straightening up, her face flushing, as she recognised the voice outside, and indeed the Captain and all the others were near at hand.

The two watched the troop while the ranks fell silent and the noise died away. They saw two young riders break from the orderly line and gallop at full speed toward the gate. Mrs. Canby had moved over beside her daughter and her husband.

"Now, look at that!" she cried. "Whenever that fellow is around Bonita is a perfect harum-scarum." She raised her voice. "Bonita, Bonita!" she called. "Stop it, I say, stop it."

The two newcomers had reached the gate by that time and perforce they reined in their horses

and dismounted. Entered first Bonita Canby, bright, laughter-loving, dressed for riding, after the manner of the territory, astride. Followed a dust-covered, equally laughter-loving, care-free young lieutenant in well worn service uniform. He looked about him.

"Mr. Canby here?" he asked and then he saw his superior officer for the first time, for his heels clicked together, his hand came to his cap.

"Colonel," he began, "Captain Hodgman's compliments, sir, and he wants to know where to make camp."

Mrs. Canby calmly took the words out of the Colonel's mouth and issued her orders like the generalissimo — or should it be ma? — she was.

"The old field," she said.

"But your home cattle —"

"Our boys'll turn 'em out for you," replied Mrs. Canby.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Denton saluted the Colonel, who saluted in return. He turned sharply on his heel and came face to face with Bonita leading the horse from which he had just dismounted and her own. He stopped, whispered a word to her and disappeared.

"Well, Miss," began her mother, taking the

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Lieutenant's place and confronting her daughter.
"It's about time you got home."

"Why, Mother," said Bonita demurely, as a cowboy relieved her of her horse, "it isn't late, is it?" with a quick glance at the Western sky.
"It's just sundown and —"

At this juncture the rancher, coat on, wild hair sleeked and well-watered and generally what he would call spruced up, made his appearance.

"Well, we're ready for 'em, Mother," he exclaimed, making a diversion during which Bonita, anxious to flee from the wrath to come, slipped quickly into the patio.

Outside, the orders for dismounting the troop and making camp were given as Lieutenant Denton made his report to Captain Hodgman in command. Canby, discovering that one leg of his trousers had caught in his boot-top according to ancient habit, and desiring to be ship-shape at both ends, walked over to the well bench and began to drag it down. Bonita slipped her arm into that of the Colonel and the two walked down the courtyard.

"Colonel," began the girl brightly, "I scouted C Troop in from Curry's wind mills myself."

"Well done," said the Colonel in mock admiration, "I will put you on the pay rolls as —"

"Miss MacCullagh's with the troop, too. She came in on the train and the Doctor went for her. They are in the ambulance, and —" she turned to her mother — "Ma?"

"What now?"

"We've planned for me to go to the Post for a little visit to Estrella with Miss MacCullagh."

"Not with this C Troop there," answered her mother decisively.

"Why not?" asked the Colonel.

"I think Bonita's a little too frisky with this first lieutenant here."

"Why, Ma!" exclaimed the girl, flushing before such outspoken bluntness.

"Do you mean Denton?" asked his superior officer.

"Yes, Denton."

"Why, Denton's a fine splendid fellow. Isn't he, Estrella?"

Estrella turned away and looked annoyed. She made no answer.

"I know all about him," said Mrs. Canby.
"You needn't appeal to Estrella. There ain't a piece of deviltry in the Valley he ain't in and when he's around Bonita she acts like a calf in a prairie fire."

"Oh, that's mere boy's fun," said the Colonel.

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"Denton? Why, Bonita, Denton's the best young cavalryman that ever sat in the saddle."

Captain Hodgman, who commanded the troop, heard this praise of Denton as he came in through the gate. His lip curled with a slight sneer which instantly disappeared as the Colonel faced him. He saluted his commanding officer and bowed to the others.

"Evenin', Captain," said the rancher.

"Good evening, sir," said Hodgman, "and ladies."

He turned to the Colonel.

"Came through all right, sir. Men and horses in good condition. Doctor Fenlon and school teacher just behind in the ambulance."

"Very well, Captain," answered the Colonel. "Let the men make camp and get supper and have everything ready in the morning to start sharp at eight."

Hodgman saluted and turned back to the gate to give the order when Canby interrupted him.

"Colonel, we'll have the officers in here an'—"
Hodgman stopped.

"No need to trouble about that, Mr. Canby, we have our tents," he said.

"Oh, come in, all of you," said his superior

officer. "It pleases Mr. Canby and his wife and there's plenty of room."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Canby, rather grimly, it must be admitted.

"Thank you," said Hodgman. "I'll tell the others then. It will be a pleasant relief from camp."

"We'll have supper presently," said Mrs. Canby.

"I'll see the troops disposed and we'll all be back before you know it," continued Hodgman from the gateway. He turned to the Colonel and saluted. "Ambulance, sir."

"All right," said the Colonel as the ambulance drove up.

Estrella walked slowly to the gate and stared after the figure of the departing captain.

"Colonel," whispered Bonita, grabbing hold of him, "you just make Ma let me visit the Post, won't you?"

"I'll do my best," said the Colonel as Doctor Fenlon, the regimental surgeon, came through the gateway, escorting a young woman. Estrella, who was nearest the gate, greeted her cordially, taking her by the hand and leading her forward.

"Miss MacCullagh," she said, "my mother and father."

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The rancher made a profound bow which he considered appropriate for the occasion. Mrs. Canby was a little more cordial to the young woman than to the others.

"How are you?" she said pleasantly enough.

She took her hand and evidently approving of her, kissed her.

"Doctor," she said, turning to the physician, "I am glad to see you here." She took a travelling bag from Miss MacCullagh and handed it to Lena who had just entered. "Lena, take this in the house. Now, Miss MacCullagh, you come right to your room. I'll lock the bathroom door on my side and you can get right in it. You need it."

"Doctor," said Canby as the two ladies bustled into the house, "sit down and rest yourself an'—"

"Mr. Canby," said the Doctor, solemnly endeavouring to rise up and down on his tiptoes and trying to bend his knees, "I shall never sit down again with comfort."

"Been in the ambulance since daylight?" laughed the Colonel.

"Yes, sir," answered the Doctor. "I had to go over and meet Miss MacCullagh at the railway station and, do you know, that school teacher's one of the nicest girls I ever saw. Not a

bit like a school marm either; blushes, you know, and all that."

The Colonel laughed again.

"Doctor, I hope you didn't make her blush. A helpless girl and a veteran like you! I'm surprised, sir."

"Mrs. Bonham," said Lena, coming back bag in hand, "that lady says this ain't her bag."

"Well, whose is it?" asked Estrella.

The Doctor looked down at his own bag in comical dismay.

"Nobody said it was her bag. Lena, it's mine. Give it to me. Here, this belongs to her. How are you?" he asked her kindly. "But there's no need to answer. You're looking lots better."

Lena stared at him a moment, flushed painfully and stumbled up the steps into the house. The Doctor shook his head and looked down at the bag in his hand.

"The idea of any one mistaking my New York Russia leather bag for that miserable affair," he added in mock surprise.

Bonita laughed at him and tripped lightly up the steps toward the door.

"Doctor, you will find your room just at the end of this hall," she said. "You can have the

bathroom after Miss MacCullagh gets through with it."

"I am very glad to wait for so good a reason," said the Doctor gravely. "Her need is greater than mine."

"It's a good thing she isn't by to hear you say that," laughed Bonita. "You and Mr. Denton will share that room together."

"Pardon me," said the Doctor who was stout and about forty, "but I can't sleep with any one, much less a man of Denton's — er — active habits."

"Two beds," explained Canby laconically.

"Oh, easy enough," said the Doctor, laughing as he went into the house whither Bonita had preceded him.

"Supper will be ready as soon as you are," said Canby, calling after them. "Don't keep it waiting. Ma don't like it."

Estrella started to follow the others into the house.

) "Are you ready, Colonel?" she asked as she passed him.

The Colonel looked himself carefully over.

"Well, what else? Want me to put on epaulettes?" he asked pleasantly as his wife smiled and passed in.

"Come, Colonel," said Canby, "there'll just be time to visit the sideboard before supper. I guess the coast is clear."

"Not for me, thank you," said the Colonel as they went into the house.

CHAPTER III

Wherein Side-Combs and the Stable Bucket Play a Large Part in an Affair of the Heart

INTO the deserted courtyard, Bonita Canby, not yet having changed her riding dress, but having got rid of the dust of the ride and looking as fresh and sweet indeed as if she had just awakened, came just in time to meet two of the officers of the troop which she had so gallantly piloted up the Valley to the ranch at its head, during the long afternoon.

"Good evening, again, Miss Bonita," began Captain Hodgman, his subordinate, Lieutenant Hallock, joining him in his salutation, while two privates carrying the two officers' hand baggage, stopped behind them. "Where are we to be placed, please?"

"You and Mr. Hallock will occupy the north room yonder, Captain. Dr. Fenlon and Mr. Denton, the one on the other side of the hall. It's the same room you had before. By the way, where is Mr. Denton?" inquired the girl, looking about with a very successful imitation of utter indifference to the answer.

"He's busy with the troop," replied Hodgman. "He'll be along presently."

"I think I'll go to meet him," said Bonita, passing out the gate with a wave of her hand to the two officers.

Captain Hodgman laughed a little sarcastically as he looked after her a moment.

"Hallock," he said at last, turning to his subordinate, "oblige me. Will you take the strikers in with the packs and —"

"Certainly, sir," answered Hallock promptly. "This way, men."

He drew aside just as he reached the doorway to permit Lena Kellar to come out. As he disappeared the girl stepped to the edge of the porch and looked about her.

"Miss Bonita," she called, not seeing either her or the Captain.

The next moment Hodgman, who had purposely kept in the background, stepped forward and faced her.

"Lena," he began softly, after assuring himself by a swift backward glance that Bonita Canby, who could still be seen through the gateway, had not heard the summons and was paying no attention.

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The girl looked at him with deep disgust and shame.

"No," she said, hastily shrinking back from him.

"Don't be foolish, Lena," began the Captain soothingly but with some anxiety in his own voice and bearing, for he was not quite sure what would be the outcome of this meeting. "You see the trouble is — er — all over now," he continued. "You've got a nice place here. I told you I'd do something handsome for you if you kept still and I will."

Lena stared down at him with growing repulsion and fury. She had good cause to hate this smiling, debonair, handsome soldier, and she was not careful to conceal her feelings when no one was by.

"I kept still," she said at last in a low, bitter tone, "not for 'something handsome' but because I didn't want my father to kill you."

Meanwhile Denton, the other lieutenant of the troop, the sight of the waiting Bonita in the gate way spurring him on, had rejoined her and the two young people came through the gate at that juncture. The woman and the man by the porch saw them at the same instant. Neither, evidently,

wished to betray the seriousness of their conversation or the attitude of the one to the other. Hodgman, man of the world and more experienced, recovered himself more easily and quickly. He laughed cheerfully, although an attentive ear, which neither Bonita nor Denton possessed for any one else at that moment, would have discovered that the laugh was mainly forced. He sprang up the steps lightly without looking back, chucked the girl, Lena, familiarly under the chin as if in all friendship and saying, "You just wait till Christmas, Lena," disappeared into the house.

The horrified, indignant servant of the house stood as if rooted to the porch, staring after him. Her attitude, the pallor of her face, the hatred in her eyes, would have betrayed her to any persons less preoccupied than the daughter of the house and the engrossed young lieutenant.

"I understand your father's going to put us up again," began Denton, making conversation merely to keep this fascinating young woman by his side.

"Miss Bonita," interrupted Lena, making a violent effort to recover herself.

"In a moment, Lena," rather impatiently answered the other, who did not wish her conversation with the young man to be interrupted then.

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"I'm too dusty," continued Denton, "for any civilised room. I'd better leave some of this real estate outside. Quigley," he continued, turning to his striker who came in with his pack, "isn't that a broom at the other end of the porch? I thought so. Now give me a good sweeping."

The striker dropped his pack, grabbed the broom and grinning broadly, applied it vigorously to Denton's uniform. Bonita retreated in a great hurry to escape the centre of the dust storm. Quigley had more eyes for Bonita than his officer and he presently found himself dusting the Lieutenant's neck, not his back.

"Careful, Quigley," cried Denton, "mind what you're about. You can't brush the sunburn off, you know. That'll do. Thanks. Take the pack into the house. Well, now that I've been properly dusted," continued the Lieutenant after Quigley had disappeared, and turning to Bonita, "what about your visit to the Post?"

"Ma hasn't decided yet."

"I'll speak to her myself, about it," said Denton quickly.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Bonita, quite convinced that Denton was probably the very worst person that could be selected to plead her cause.

"No?" asked Denton in great surprise.

"Why not? Oh, hello, Tony," he added, as Bonita shook her head and nodded in the direction of the stables whence a young Mexican vaquero came into the yard carrying a horse bucket.

Tony Mostano was the youngest, the handsomest, the most reckless and also the most gaudily attired, of all the men attached to the ranch. He and Denton had ridden and hunted together when the young officer had visited the ranch and they were great friends. He nodded back to the Lieutenant with a broad grin as he slowly crossed the back of the patio.

"You mustn't speak to Ma on any account," continued the girl. "If she says anything to you you must pretend not to — care about it."

"Pretend not to care! Why must I pretend?"

"Well, all of you must pretend not to care," laughed Bonita, "because I'm sure that Ma thinks —"

"Oh," laughed Denton in his turn as the girl stopped in confusion, "I understand. By the way, Tony," he called after the vaquero, "is that a horse bucket you've got?"

"Yes, sir," answered Tony, stopping.

"Water in it?"

"Plenty."

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"That'll do for me. Let me have it."

"You're not going to wash out here," exclaimed Bonita in great surprise, "when things are so much nicer and more convenient in your room!"

"That's just what I'm going to do," answered Denton, taking off his cap and bending over the bucket and beginning to wash his hands.

"But why?"

"I like the — er — scenery — around here," returned Denton, smiling at her and then he proceeded to bury his face in the water. "This is quite luxurious for a soldier on the march, you know," he spluttered out presently.

Bonita, thoroughly understanding the allusion, matched his smile with her own. Lena, tired of waiting and having soon seen that she was not wanted, had gone into the house whither Tony's anxious stare followed her, but as if she were there the young girl began pompously giving directions.

"Lena, a towel please for Mr. Denton; some soap and —"

Denton had raised his head in time to catch the remark and he answered promptly.

"I don't need any towel, Miss Bonita. What 'do you suppose I carry a handkerchief for?"

As he spoke the three strikers came back.

They saluted to Denton, two of them passed on but Quigley stopped for a moment.

"Is that all, Lieutenant?" he asked, grinning broadly at his popular young officer.

"That's all, Quigley. Thanks."

Lena had been within earshot evidently and had taken Bonita's imaginary call as a reality, for she followed the strikers and presented a clean towel to the Lieutenant who had been tugging at his handkerchief with wet hands.

"Hello, Lena," said Denton cheerfully and kindly, "glad to see you." He grabbed the towel and dried himself with rude masculine rubbing, Bonita watching him with deep interest. "There," he said, lifting his head and staring at her, "how's that?"

"It's all right, I think, but your hair."

"Here's where bald old age has the advantage of youth," he said. "Does mine look so very bad?"

He made a frantic effort to smooth it with his fingers as he spoke.

"Well,—not so very awful," she answered, dubiously surveying the rather ragged-looking results of his manipulation.

"Oh, well, lend me a side-comb and — Thank you," he added, taking the side-comb from her

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hand. "Tony, I'm through with the bucket. You can take it away and the towel too, Lena."

But Lena was not looking at him. A grizzled old soldier, wearing the chevrons of a sergeant had suddenly appeared in the gateway. With a little scream of mingled joy and apprehension, Lena ran toward him and as he caught her to his breast and called her by name she clasped her own arms about his neck and kissed him. The sight awakened a volcano of slumbering passion in the mind of the vaquero. Dropping the bucket he shouted out in his broken English.

"Who is this man?" With a leap like a young tiger he sprang toward the gate. "You — you!" he continued, thrusting his face forward and gritting out the words vehemently toward the astonished Sergeant.

Before the soldier could make any reply, Lena, with truer instinct for the cause of the agitation, released herself from the Sergeant's grasp and interposed between the two men.

"This is my father," she said with dignity.

The vaquero gazed at her with open-mouthed astonishment, the wrath and temper fading from his face were supplanted by a look of confusion and of shame. Like the man without the wedding garment, he was suddenly speechless. He

turned, picked up the bucket and hanging his head sheepishly, stalked moodily around the house and out of sight. Bonita and Denton broke into uproarious laughter, in which even Lena joined. The Sergeant, however, a grim sort of a man, preserved his iron calm. As soon as he could he saluted his superior.

"Lieutenant Denton, stables, sir," he said formally with a marked German accent which his years of service had not eradicated.

"Very well," said Denton, returning the salute, "I'll be right out."

Kellar turned on his heel with military abruptness, swung toward the gate, thought better of it, turned again.

"Lieutenant?"

"Sergeant?"

"Who is that man?"

"That's one of the vaqueros on the ranch, here; one of Mr. Canby's cow punchers, you know," answered the officer.

Sergeant Kellar stared a moment in the direction of the vanished figure of the discomfited Tony. He muttered something in German in his grey moustache and walked through the gate. This time Lena did not laugh. She stood staring anxiously after her father, her pretty face clouded

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and then she crossed the courtyard and went into the buildings on the other side.

"Here's your comb, Miss Bonita, I have to go, now," said Denton, turning away, having finished his rough-and-ready toilet without the aid of a mirror.

"But where?"

"Inspection of stables."

"But supper's ready."

"I'm afraid I'll be a little late for it then. Will you make my apologies to your mother and —"

"I'll be a little late, myself," said Bonita, going slowly toward the house.

"You will, eh? Why?" asked Denton eagerly.

"I have to change my dress, you know."

"Oh, I see. By the way, it'll take me just about fifteen minutes with the horses."

Bonita laughed.

"And it'll take me just about the same time to dress," she declared.

"That'll make us both late, won't it?"

"Yes. What have you got there, Lena?" asked Miss Canby as Lena came out from the stables carrying something.

"It's a mandolin, Miss Bonita."

"Yes, I see, but you don't play it. Whose is it?"

"It belongs to Tony," answered the girl, blushing.

"Oh, very well," smiled her young mistress.

"Miss Bonita," began Denton as Lena disappeared once more, "do you know the most exciting thing that has happened to me since I have been in Arizona?"

He had evidently forgotten stable call for the time being and Bonita was equally indifferent to the demands of her dress.

"No. What?" she answered and asked.

"That side-comb," was the mysterious reply, delivered with lowered voice and meaning look.

"This side-comb!" exclaimed Bonita, artlessly swinging herself up on the table, an example which Denton instantly followed.

"Yes, that side-comb."

"I don't see anything exciting about that," she answered with the most indifferent air in the world. "It's like any other side-comb only a little more curved perhaps."

"Well, may be that's it. Funny, though, to run up against a new curve, way out here."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, I don't know that I do myself," con-

tinued the young man fatuously. "You see the — er — scenery about here is so distracting and so unsettling."

"The scenery!" exclaimed Bonita, who very much wished to have her ignorance enlightened.

"That comb —" Denton began and then paused. "Now, I've combed my own hair ever since my mother quit brushing it round a broom handle," he went on reflectively. "I've used all kinds of combs, combs just fresh from the drug store, and smelling like cologne. I've even used combs that were chained to roller-towels and about which the less said the better. I've used every sort you can think of and some that you can't. And I asked you for that one more in fun than anything else." He drew nearer to her. He lowered his voice and spoke with his face close over her shoulder. "I can never tell you just how I felt when I used that one, Miss Bonita."

The young lady jumped down from the table and turned toward him. His words were foolish enough, but his manner and bearing were quite serious. His eyes stared at her out of the growing twilight with sort of a passionate eagerness. Lena and Tony had evidently got together somewhere, for the notes of the mandolin came to

them through the still evening air. They listened a moment.

"You're a funny fellow," said Bonita lightly and yet nervously.

"Am I?" asked Denton.

"Yes."

He drew nearer to her and she slowly retreated as he advanced. His face was very close to hers. He wondered afterwards, and she wondered too, why he did not kiss her, but he did not and perhaps it was just as well he did not. Bonita was a girl with whom it was not safe to venture too far. Denton recovered himself first. He stopped and sought to pick up the interrupted conversation.

"You know, Miss Bonita, at the Post we bachelors have quarters in the same building," he began.

"Yes, I know."

"After being together awhile, we become rather free with one another's possessions. It's a way we got into at the Academy. But, if we don't like a chap pretty well, we don't use his things. Now, how do girls think about that?"

"I don't think they know about it," answered Bonita with her best Alice-in-Wonderland manner, staring at him with an innocent expression beside which the most unsophisticated child would

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have looked the personification of worldly wisdom not to say guile. "Has it been printed?"

"I mean among themselves," said Denton rather sharply.

"Yes," answered Bonita, "they wouldn't do it either unless —"

"Unless what?"

"Unless they 'like a chap pretty well,' too," she quoted.

"Oh," said Denton greatly relieved, "girls are kind of human after all instead of angels."

Bonita laughed.

"At times, yes."

"I'd like to ask you a question," continued the Lieutenant, again drawing dangerously near. "Has any other chap ever used that particular comb?"

"No."

"Nor girl?"

"No one but I."

Denton smiled broadly.

"I am so glad," he began.

"You see," interrupted the girl, taking the comb from her hair into which she had thrust it when he returned it, and looking at it critically as if to learn why it was the object of so much attention, "I haven't had this one so very long, you know."

"Oh," returned Denton quieted, even abashed, by the inference she intended to be drawn from the remark. "I suppose there aren't many fellows passing this way, are there?"

"No," answered Bonita, "not many."

"Well," said Denton sadly, "that rather cuts down my average, still —"

"Still what?" asked the girl breathlessly as he lingered over the words.

"Will you do me a favour?"

"Certainly."

"Don't lend it to any other fellow — ever," he said emphatically. "Will you not?"

Bonita slowly shook her head in the negative he desired.

"Thank you."

"But it's pretty hard to tell them apart," said Bonita, taking the other from her hair and comparing them.

"I mean both," he answered promptly.

"Both!" said the girl mischievously. "Isn't that asking a good deal, and it would be rather hard —"

"Both," interrupted Denton. "Your promise covers both, doesn't it? Oh, blessed little nod!" he added as Bonita slowly acquiesced again. "Thank you. Really I had quite forgot the sta-

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bles," continued the Lieutenant. "You make a man forget anything and everything but you."

"In fifteen minutes?" she queried, turning away reluctantly.

"Yes," he answered, following her example and in the same mood.

"Oh, Mr. Denton," she began suddenly as a new idea struck her.

"Yes?" answered Denton, suddenly stopping once more in the gate and then coming back to her as if he had not a care or a duty in the world.

"You've been around this country of ours a good deal, haven't you?" she asked demurely.

"Quite a bit, yes."

"Have you tied up to very many side-combs yourself?" laughed the girl mischievously.

"This is my first pair," was the unequivocal answer. "It isn't going to be too hard to keep your promise, is it? You see," he continued, following her as she went toward the house, "in this cattle country some fellows rope the first pretty creature they see and —"

She stopped and he stepped close to her. She did not look around at him and he did not care at the moment.

"You see I am only asking a little loyalty in

the matter of — er — side-combs," he went on.
"Then if that doesn't fret her, why —"

He stretched out his hands toward her where she stood motionless. He wanted to take her in his arms but he felt that the time was not yet. Instead he lifted her braided hair tenderly, kissed it, turned abruptly on his heel as if he could not trust himself further and walked out of the gate. Bonita stared after him and listened to his footsteps die away. Somewhere in the house a bell rang, the mandolin stopped playing, the daylight died away. Bonita discovered that it was night. She looked up joyously toward the stars shining overhead, threw a kiss with her hands nowhere and to nobody in particular and went into the house.

CHAPTER IV

Captain Hodgman Poaching on Another's Field is Not Adverse to a Little Mild Sport on the Side

THE girl stared after the departing figure of the young lieutenant until it was lost to sight in the growing darkness. She was in no hurry to change her dress. She could have made her simple toilet in a few minutes. She would have to protract the operation unduly so as not to be ready before Denton returned from his duty, which would probably detain him longer than a quarter of an hour, however he might hasten. The thought of being late for dinner in such company as his evidently had little terrors for her as the full table had no special attraction. She lingered in the patio, therefore, immersed in her own pleasant thoughts until her sweet and girlish reveries were broken by the advent of the Doctor, the school teacher and the mistress of the ranch, who happened to meet on the porch. The Doctor had already acquired the habit of being on the spot when Miss MacCullagh was in evidence. He sought to infuse a professional solicitude in his opening remark

to that lady but his attempt was a dismal failure. Miss MacCullagh was young, healthy, vigorous. There was no reason on earth for considering her as a subject for medical treatment. When the Doctor asked her if she felt better after her bath and after that delightful freshening process which dainty women have with their garments, she looked at him with great surprise, opening her eyes widely and remarking:

"Why, of course. Doesn't a bath always refresh one after such a hot, dusty ride and —"

"Well then," said the Doctor, pointing to the door, "the dining room I remember is off this way."

"Is that you, Bonita?" asked Mrs. Canby, peering down at her in the twilight as the two others on the porch, now engaged in brisk conversation, turned toward the indicated entrance.

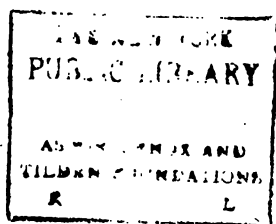
"Yes, Ma."

"I thought I saw you down there in the shadow of the wall, staring down the Valley. Why, you ain't ready for dinner!" she added, as the girl came slowly forward toward her mother out of the shadows and into the bright light streaming from doors and windows of the ranch house.

"No," admitted her daughter. "I'm not very hungry, Ma."



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THE PARTING.



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"Doctor," said Mrs. Canby, turning about and clutching the slow-moving physician by the arm, "I don't like it when Bonita ain't hungry. There's something the matter when a child won't eat."

"A child!" expostulated Bonita with a resentful toss of her pretty head, but her prosaic and unromantic mother went on unheeding.

"I wish you'd give her something for her appetite, Doctor. The soldiers always seem to excite her so."

"I'll be a homeopath for once, ma'am," said the Doctor.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Mrs. Canby curiously.

"I'll prescribe another soldier."

"What an absurd jest," said Miss MacCullagh with severe coldness and in her very best Boston manner.

"Git out!" said Mrs. Canby with her Western frankness.

"Best thing I can do," said the Doctor, his fat sides shaking.

"Well, hurry up, Bonita. We won't wait for you. Go on, Doctor, Miss MacCullagh," said Mrs. Canby, laughing in turn in spite of herself and ushering the others into the dining room whither Mr. Hallock had preceded them from

the hall and was already busy with Mr. Canby and the Colonel.

Captain Hodgman came along the hall at the same moment, stopped by the dining-room door, glanced out on the porch, saw the girl and decided that there was something more attractive on the porch than in the room. He stepped through the hall door, descended to the courtyard and approached her.

"Miss Canby," he began lightly, "that was the supper bell that rang a moment ago, was it not?"

"Yes, it's ready and the others have gone in."

"Aren't you going in?" asked Hodgman.

"No, not just yet," answered the girl evasively. "I've got to change my dress, you know."

"Can't improve on that," returned the soldier, surveying her with, if anything, a little too much admiration.

The girl laughed and made a bow in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"Who taught you to ride, Miss Bonita? Must have been a master."

Bonita laughed again, not ill pleased at this sort of flattery, obvious though it was.

"Pa says I was able to ride before I could walk. You know anybody in Arizona who can't ride a horse, had better be dead," she answered.

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"Well, if riding be a test, you have a long life ahead of you," said Hodgman in a mood apparently a trifle more serious than the occasion warranted.

"Thank you," returned the girl. "But not in Arizona, I hope," she added impulsively.

"You don't like Arizona?"

Promptly enough she got back at him.

"Do you?"

"Why, I — I have to."

"Well, I have to also — for a while anyway," said the girl.

"H'm," said the Captain, coming nearer to her, "have you made any plans for escape yet?"

His words were light and careless, yet in spite of himself there was an undercurrent of meaning in them, a tone, an implication, which Bonita found it impossible to resent, which she did not like, and which nevertheless had some sort of curiosity-stimulating interest.

"No," she said, looking him straight in the eyes. "None." She hesitated a moment, her hand idly went to her hair. She took from it one of the side-combs, the one *he* had used. She looked hard at it for a second or two. "None definite, that is," she added, looking up at the Captain at last.

Hodgman came a step nearer, he lowered his voice, he bent toward her with an air of deferential eagerness. He was a sufficiently young and good-looking chap — and knew it — with what many women had called, a taking way. And the first rays of the rising moon over the wall were on his face, not on hers.

"Do you know," he said softly, "you have never seemed like an Arizona girl to me, Miss Bonita."

"No?" laughed the girl, pleased in spite of herself by this trite but, under the circumstances, subtle and insidious remark. "Well, you see I went to school in 'Frisco," she added naively in an explanatory mood.

Hodgman bit his lip a moment to hide his smile at her ingenuousness.

"You don't seem like a California girl either," he went on, carefully feeling his way.

"Don't I?" exclaimed Bonita more and more pleased.

His voice was quite caressing now and his manner suited it. He was so interested, not so much in Bonita particularly, although she was a sufficiently fascinating plaything, but in the femininity of the situation, that he did not notice Mrs. Bonham's quiet entrance upon the porch above them.

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She saw the two together. She noted their relative positions. The interest of the Captain was denoted by every line of his figure. She stopped as if petrified. She had no scruples about watching and listening for various reasons.

"What do I seem like?" asked Bonita, looking up at him and very pretty her face was in the shadow as he looked down upon it.

"God's country is down East, you know, Miss Bonita; between the Mohawk River and Long Island Sound — close to Long Island Sound, too."

"Oh!" said Bonita, unconsciously lowering her own voice to match with his, although by the silent listener on the porch all they said could be heard. "You call that God's country?"

"I do. And it seems to be where you belong," he went on with a sudden almost passionate emphasis. "If you were to spend one year there you would be heartbroken over every year you had wasted on those ashes yonder, on these sands, little girl."

He was much closer to her now. In fact, almost in touch with her, and there was a strange fascination for the somewhat unsophisticated girl in the piercing intense glance of his bright eyes. The listener decided that it was high time to interfere — for more reasons than solicitude for

Bonita it must be admitted. She came forward. Her footfall purposely emphasised, broke the tension of the situation. Her words were commonplace enough.

"Oh, Bonita —" she began.

Hodgman started back with a little gesture of annoyance. Bonita started, too, but in a different way.

"Yes?" she answered.

"Why aren't you dressing?" asked her sister gravely.

"I am late," replied the girl cheerfully, suspecting nothing at all amiss. "Excuse me, Captain." And as Hodgman bowed to her she ran into the house. The two left alone on the porch faced each other.

"Captain Hodgman —" began Estrella Bonham coldly, severely, even sarcastically.

"Yes?" answered Hodgman, drawing himself up and bracing himself for the shock of the attack he merited.

"Of course," continued Mrs. Bonham in the same manner, "Bonita is one of God's loveliest creatures even if she doesn't live in New York, but —"

"Yes, but what?" he asked as she paused.

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"But if I were you I'd let some one else tell her so," she continued.

She strove to continue to speak dispassionately but, in spite of herself, her voice did tremble a little, for — sad as is the admission — she herself cared more for this man than any woman should care for one not her husband. It appalled her sometimes to think how tight a hold upon her heart he had secured, and sometimes she gloried in that shame! She was bitterly wounded then, and not a little jealous as well.

"Why, there was nothing wrong in that, was there?" asked Hodgman with well assumed lightness in voice and bearing.

"Wrong? Well, perhaps not in the words but there was something in the whole episode that for the moment made me wonder if you weren't the most insincere man I had ever met," answered the woman resentfully.

This time there was no mistaking the bitterness in her voice. It was a bitterness which Hodgman did not care to see developed. He had gone too far, he had made a mistake in playing his game. He strove to retrieve his blunder.

"Why," he began in a carefully modulated tone of gentle expostulation, coupled with a look at

once devoted and appealing, "the young lady is your sister."

"That is what I urge. You can't use it in your defence."

"Defence — do I need any defence?"

"You were trying to impress Bonita," said the woman nervously. "I know, I can see and hear."

"Yes?" said Hodgman, coolly seeing an opening and taking instant advantage of it, "and your look is saying that I had also tried to — impress — you."

Estrella drew herself up.

"I am the wife of your colonel, Captain Hodgman," she answered, forcing the words out against the wild suggestion of her heart. "You are unpleasantly — personal."

"Certainly," said Hodgman, deferentially but keenly alive to the situation and enjoying it immensely, "I was not unpleasantly personal to you when I spoke to your sister and —"

"You were trying to make Bonita unhappy with her surroundings," continued the woman passionately.

She had descended from the porch to the yard and they were now quite out of hearing of the group in the dining room.

"The law of progress —" he began.

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But Estrella Bonham was not in the mood for platitudes.

"You have taken the content from my life for your amusement. Let hers alone," she said vehemently.

"Amusement!" exclaimed Hodgman.

A quick glance revealed the fact that they were absolutely alone in the dusk. He came nearer to her. He ventured to lay his hand upon her shoulder.

"Estrella," he said softly, "look at me."

She did not resent his touch, on the contrary, she looked at him and then turned away.

"I didn't say glance at me, but look!" he went on.

Then he did not make any attempt to hide the passion in his voice. In the case of Bonita it had been carefully repressed, in the case of Estrella it was calculatedly given free course. There was challenge in his voice and bearing, an assertion of mastery in his position and touch. Estrella knew that she ought to resent both, that honour and everything else that went to make a true woman should instantly arm her against him. But she was helpless. As if under some compulsion, she turned her face to his and looked at him. In bravado, she forced herself to say,

"I hope you don't think I fear you, Captain Hodgman."

"Fear me?" he whispered. "Of course not. Why should you? Now, don't say I stole your peace of mind. Lethargy isn't content. You were dreaming here in the hot sands like a torpid nestling. I talked of the ocean and the smell of the salt sea, you began to wake up, you breathed deeper"—he moved his free hand softly before her face—"as I feel you breathing now. The languor went out of your eyes as it is going now, and your soul came into them."

He spoke brokenly as if his emotions were so great that his words could only come from him in short, disconnected phrases. Estrella, some resisting power left in her, interrupted. She spoke hurriedly as if to reassure herself.

"I have the love of the best man in the world," she panted out.

"Which should fill every hour," sneered Hodgman with diabolic readiness.

"And I love him," added Estrella, desperately forcing her lips to a confession which her heart did not second.

Hodgman laughed, his hand fell from her shoulder. He drew back a little.

"Like a father," he said meaningly.

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"You're not a man," said Estrella. "You're a devil."

"Not exactly," said Hodgman, bending toward her again. "This is the wilderness and all these things I show you," he went on with reckless, audacious blasphemy, "but I don't ask you to bow down and worship me. I'm the idolater."

"I don't want your idolatry," answered the woman faintly, all her defences carried by storm, her resisting power almost gone.

"I love you — love you," said Hodgman passionately. "As I would love a rose, to look at — to inhale — to hold."

Estrella Bonham put up her hand.

"Perhaps, to crush," she whispered.

"If it were sweeter so," answered Hodgman, "then — to crush!"

He stared at her. She sought to avert her face again but could not before the compelling mastery of his glance. Slowly she extended her hand. He seized it.

"Estrella!" he whispered.

"Leonard!" returned the woman in utter abandonment, forgetful of everything but of him and the hour, the shadows that shrouded them, the moonlight, the loneliness, the stillness of the place.

Hodgman's arm encircled her waist, he drew her

hand close to his breast. In spite of herself, she lifted her face, her lips, toward his — A footstep rang on the hard earth of the patio. Hodgman had his back to the gateway. Estrella Bonham first heard, then saw and recognised the newcomer. She drew back quickly. Hodgman glanced at her in surprise. He noted the direction of her frightened gaze, then he too heard the footstep; he turned to find himself confronted by his subordinate who had seen — what? How much, had he seen? A frown of black fury covered the Captain's face and a look of surprise and indignation spread over the face of the Lieutenant who had seen and heard quite too much in the few seconds in which he had the couple in view. He walked straight up to his superior, saluted him with punctilious military respect and decorum but with a bitter contempt and resentment quite evident in his demeanour. The Lieutenant was all on fire to defend the honour of his beloved Colonel, to say nothing of the Colonel's wife.

"Captain Hodgman," he began, standing very erect and square and looking his superior straight in the face.

"Mr. Denton," said Hodgman and although the words of both men were absolutely simple and conventional, their tones spoke volumes.

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"That horse of Shannon's is unfit for saddle to-morrow."

"Ah, will he do with a blanket?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," said Hodgman, turning away.

Estrella had taken advantage of the opportunity and had gone up on the porch. Hodgman started to follow her. Denton squarely in the way stood as if rooted to the spot, choking down things he would like to say, restraining himself from actions he would like to take. As Hodgman avoided him and mounted the steps, the suspicious silence behind him got on his nerves. He wheeled about.

"Anything further, Mr. Denton?" he asked sharply.

"Only supper, I believe, sir," answered Denton with equal sharpness.

Hodgman took a step toward him. There was no mistaking his purpose nor was there any mistaking the purpose and opinion of the other man who stood stubbornly awaiting him. Estrella Bonham had nothing to gain and everything to lose by an encounter between these two.

"Captain," she stepped back and clutched him by the arm in panic terror, "come," she pleaded.

But Hodgman was not to be so lightly moved.

He took another step in Denton's direction and Denton, as if he had suddenly come to a resolution, stepped menacingly forward toward the Captain, the low table in the courtyard alone separating them.

"Captain Hodgman," persisted the almost frantic woman, "think. You must come. Mr. Denton, they are already at the table. You will come also."

Hodgman turned at last, Denton followed and the three somehow got into the dining room. The outbreak had been averted or postponed, but at what a cost thought the terror-stricken woman.

BOOK II
OLD FORT GRANT
FOR THE HONOUR OF A WOMAN

CHAPTER V

At the Colonel's Ball More Things Go on Than Dancing to the Music

BONITA CANBY had never enjoyed herself quite so much in her life as she had at old Fort Grant. [The appeals of the Colonel and his wife, seconded by the big rancher's approval and emphasised by her own importunities, had at last wrung from her unwilling mother a reluctant consent for Bonita to pay the hoped-for visit to the Army Post. Women of any condition, and particularly unmarried ones, were few and far between in those days in Arizona and especially at such an isolated frontier post as Fort Grant. A jealous officer would have had an uneasy time even with the most demure, discreet and devoted of wives, for married and unmarried together there were not nearly enough to go around.

The regiment was a happy one. It contained a larger number of young officers than is usual. It had seen some hard service in the Indian wars and its older officers had been pretty well thinned out by casualties in action. Promotion, entirely regimental, had been remarkably rapid because of

this. The youngsters were full of life and energy and fun. They had a good time and they made everybody about them have the same. Hence Bonita's joy. They did not neglect their soldierly duties, however. Colonel Bonham saw to that and, indeed, there was no wish or desire toward that. They were all good soldiers and enamoured of their profession. But when occasion served, and they made it serve pretty frequently it must be admitted, they entered into the pursuit of happiness with the same whole-hearted zeal that they followed their warrior trade.

When any one was a belle merely because she was a woman, quite irrespective of any other qualities for that position, Bonita Canby, blessed with youth and beauty and the freshness of a mountain flower — well, what was she? The Post was madly in love with her and she was quite catholic in her response to this universal affection; at least, so far as the unmarried officers were concerned. Generously she embraced them all in her big heart. At least, she said so and she acted so, although those not allowed to play the fascinating game of hearts save in the desultory manner which was permitted the married, had a shrewd idea that First Lieutenant Denton of Hodgman's troop had a little advantage over his numerous rivals.

The indications were not yet sufficiently definite, however, nor was the opinion so widely prevalent as to have removed the quarry from the further pursuit of other hunters. Consequently the subalterns at Fort Grant vied with each other in providing entertainment for their fair guest. Drills, reviews, rides, drives, picnics, parties, succeeded one another, culminating at last in a grand ball at the Colonel's quarters.

The uneasy and inexorable mother had at last demanded the immediate return of her remaining child. Bonita was due at the ranch in the Aravaipa Valley in a few days. She was making the most of this her last opportunity and the others were following her example. It must be admitted that they did not need much encouragement.

Even the prim, staid New England school mistress had caught the contagion of the West and found herself in her moments of reflection amazed and even appalled at the levities she had not only condoned but had welcomed and participated in. And she, too, had blossomed out in the most extraordinary manner. She, also, had been a guest at the Post and Doctor Fenlon, fat, fair and — but the proverb will stop there. It was obvious that Dr. Fenlon was fair, it was even more obvious that he was fat, but he drew the line at forty and

refused on the advice of counsel to commit himself on that point.

In her more restrained moments the school mistress used to say that the Doctor was the only man who could talk on the deeper things of life. She was forced to add that frequently the Doctor outfrivolous the most frivolous. And that she sometimes enjoyed the latter more than the former, in her heart of hearts, horrified her.

Into all the gaieties of the Post, Bonita's sister, the Colonel's wife, had likewise plunged with what the popular novelist would characterise as a feverish abandonment. It was as if she sought relief from something that oppressed her in quieter moments and as if she were determined that she would have no quieter moments for that very reason. The Colonel, indulgent as ever to his young wife, fought down as best he could any suspicions that might have been engendered and with smiling face, imperturbable bearing and sad heart gave her a free rein. It was at her suggestion that the round of festivities had terminated in a ball. After all the preparations had been made, the invitations issued to everybody at the Post and to many of the people from the nearest town, the Colonel was suddenly ordered to Los Angeles on important military business. By leaving the night of the

ball about midnight he could just reach the Coast in time to discharge his duty. He had refused to allow the party to be called off or postponed, pointing out that he would be there to welcome the guests and he could leave behind him a worthy representative in the person of his beautiful young wife to speed their parting.

A big tent had been erected in the yard, a temporary floor had been laid and waxed, lanterns had been procured, the regimental band had been called into service and everything had gone beautifully. The big living room in the Colonel's quarters, connected with the tent by a covered way, had been used as a withdrawing room by those who were inclined to rest between dances and partake of light refreshment. The company was not so large, the possible demands upon the room were so few, that it was never crowded. The entrancing music was so appealing, the opportunities to dance to the heart's content were so inviting that people who came in there for rest or refreshment usually could not resist the invitation very long.

Doctor Fenlon sauntered in during one of the intermissions. He was followed by Miss McCullagh. Indeed, he had brought her into the room on his arm, which she dropped immediately

they entered. The Doctor walked to the big window, glanced out a moment over the broad sill at the parade ground lying white in the moonlight. He presently turned from the window with its deep embrasure, walked across the room to the other side, stopped before the great big open fireplace in which a low fire was blazing, for the nights were sometimes quite cool, took one of the Colonel's cigarettes from a box on a table, lighted it, sank down into a big chair conveniently at hand, blew a long cloud of smoke into the air and stared meditatively up at the clock. His coolness under the severe regard of the young school mistress was remarkable. It was partly poise and partly pose, doubtless, but it served him admirably. Miss MacCullagh had become accustomed to especial notice from the Doctor and she could hardly endure such cavalier treatment. Her foot tapped the floor irritably and she was just about to speak.

"Twelve o'clock," at last began the Doctor, blowing a cloud as he drawled out the words; "nearly time for this party to break up. I suppose these young cubs will want to dance till daylight."

"Why don't you smoke out-of-doors, Doctor Fenlon?" asked Miss MacCullagh severely and irrelevantly.

"I frequently do," returned the Doctor, calmly turning his head and surveying her, looking very sweet and fresh and pretty, quite girlish for her, in her simple evening gown, her bright eyes snapping with suppressed irritation as she tapped her dress nervously with her fan.

"Are you ever serious, Doctor Fenlon?" she asked vehemently.

"Now, Miss MacCullagh," said the Doctor mildly, "do you mean I am not serious in my intentions?"

"Intentions!" exclaimed the little school mistress indignantly, scornful. "I mean in your life. I don't believe you have ever had a sorrow in the whole course of your existence."

The Doctor slowly took his cigarette out of his mouth and looked meditatively at the end of it, evidently trying to recall some episode sufficiently grave to enable him to make a proper reply.

"Why, you are mistaken," he said retrospectively at last. "I have had sorrows in my life and very recently, too."

"Yes?" said Miss MacCullagh interrogatively, as he paused, shaking his head sadly with an air of deep gloom. "What were they?"

"Well, I laid down three queens last night with

nothing against them but a couple of ten spots. Bluffed me cold! I lost the pot."

"Ah," snapped out the school teacher coldly with her best Boston manner, "God gave you some brains, Doctor Fenlon. I should imagine so at least from your appearance if nothing else. He put them far enough back to leave room for some preception."

"Can't see through a pasteboard," remonstrated the Doctor mildly. "I couldn't tell it was a bluff and —"

"And yet you dawdle your life away over a pack of cards!" she interrupted in deep and disdainful disgust.

"What else have I got to do?" he asked plaintively. "Can't make the regiment take medicine when it ain't sick, can I. That is, not always."

"Why not write?" suggested Miss MacCullagh emphatically. "Why not read? Why not walk? Why, look at you, you aren't even in good physical condition."

The Doctor glanced at his own rotund form and then his eyes sought Miss MacCullagh's slim, not to say spare, figure.

"Now, you're jealous of my figure," he said, his eyes twinkling.

The lady threw up her hands. She was beaten

by the imperturbable physician. He was hopeless. She turned, stalked across the room — stalk is the best word to describe her movements in her state of mind — and disappeared through the door passing Sergeant Kellar and his daughter, Lena, in the entrance.

Kellar, who was supervising the party — the arrangements, that is — took in the condition of the room promptly. Some of the other guests had left plates and glasses upon the table. The place was in some disorder.

“Clean up everything here first, den de porch,” said Kellar in his broken German. “Here’s a spoon on the floor, Lena. Somebody step on him.” He straightened it out and dropped it into a dish. “Get it all in order. I’ll be back in a minute.”

His daughter busied herself with the tasks appointed and finally came over to the Doctor who had sat quietly before the fire not regarding her.

“Is this your plate, Doctor? Are you through with it?” she asked.

“Not mine, but take it. By the way, Lena,” he called after her just as she was about to disappear through the doorway leading to the hall and the back part of the house whither her father had gone.

"What is it, Doctor?" answered the girl, stopping.

The Doctor did not even yet look at her, again he stared hard at the unoffending end of his cigarette with a gentle consideration for her. He did not want her to feel that any one was surveying her.

"Is that man doing anything for you?" he asked quietly.

Lena started, almost dropped the plates. She looked around quickly and furtively to be sure that no one overheard and heaved a sigh of relief that they were alone.

"I won't let him do anything for me," she said slowly but with deep emphasis.

The Doctor rose, threw away his cigarette and walked over toward her. He spoke in the kindest and gentlest way but with decision and firmness. If prim little Miss MacCullagh could have seen him then she might have found more excuse for the affection which he had undoubtedly inspired in her than she had heretofore been able to discover after much searching of heart.

"You must," said the physician firmly. "You know it is not only of yourself you have to think. I have kept your secret faithfully as I promised,

but now you must let me speak to him, and make some arrangement for the support of that little one."

"My father," faltered Lena. "I am afraid he will find it out. My father would kill him. I can't bear —"

"But your father won't find it out," urged the Doctor.

"You wouldn't tell my father who it was, would you?"

"No."

"You haven't told anybody, have you?"

"No, certainly not."

"Because," said Lena, "you're the only one I have told his name and I —"

"Lena," cried the Sergeant in his gruff way as he re-entered the room, "what are you doing? Make quick."

"Yes, Father," answered the girl hurriedly, her face changing.

She cast one swift, appealing glance at the Doctor and went out with her burden. The sudden advent of the Sergeant had been startling but the Doctor was too much of a veteran to show any discomfiture. Lighting another cigarette, he coolly turned to the newcomer.

"I really must compliment you, Kellar," he said, "on your part of this pleasant entertainment."

"Yes, sir," said Kellar, saluting and looking much pleased.

"Couldn't have gone smoother at Delmonico's in New York."

"I haf vorked at a restaurant in Berlin in my young days, Herr Doctor," said Kellar with ill-concealed pride, his bearing showing his satisfaction.

"Lena's very handy, too," continued the physician quietly.

"Yes," admitted the Sergeant, all the pride and pleasure suddenly vanishing from his face, leaving it quite grim and determined. "My daughter, she vould be a good vaitress."

"I know."

"But it is much better she is a striker for Miss Canby."

"Much better," said the Doctor.

"Dat Canby ranch is a nice place for a girl, better dan a dam't Cavalry Post like Fort —"

He never finished the sentence for Bonita appeared at the window with Miss MacCullagh. A dance had just ended.

"Sergeant," she asked, leaning over the case-

ment and staring into the room, "have you seen Mr. Denton?"

"Not now, Miss. Lieutenant Denton is officer of the day," said the Sergeant.

"I know," returned the girl.

Miss MacCullagh left her side as she spoke and came through the door.

"But he had that last dance with me," pouted Bonita, speaking to nobody in particular. "And he didn't—"

She stopped her complaint for one reason because, as usual, the school mistress and the physician were again engaged in a wordy controversy. She therefore left the window and turned to follow her companion into the room.

"Why don't you dance, Doctor? You could at least do that," asked Miss MacCullagh, sarcastically staring at the surgeon who had gallantly arisen at her entrance.

Her glance took him in up and down — and crossways too! He had unbuttoned his tight uniform jacket for the greater comfort and enjoyment of his smoke, and unconsciously as she came in he hitched up his trousers only held at all by a tightly drawn and rather dilapidated old leather belt.

"You might dance if you wore suspenders,"

continued the sarcastic lady. "Any way, it would be good for your health."

"Miss Canby," said the Sergeant most respectfully to Bonita as she came through the door at this juncture, "ven are you going to de ranch back again?"

"As soon as the Colonel gets back from Los Angeles where he goes to-night," answered the girl rather surprised at the question.

"You must oxgooze, Miss Canby," continued the Sergeant earnestly, "but you take back mine Lena vit you? Yes?"

"Take Lena? Well, I think I will," replied Bonita promptly. "I couldn't do without Lena. She's my striker you know."

"Good!" said Kellar. "Much obliged."

"Forgive me, Miss Canby," interposed Denton, coming hurriedly through the doorway.

He was in full uniform, wearing side-arms and sash, indicating that he was on duty and what his duty was.

"Forgive me," he repeated. "I knew I had that last dance with you. I have longed for it, I have even dreamed about it, but I just couldn't make it. I never was so sorry to miss a dance before. Ah, Sergeant."

"Lieutenant Denton," answered Kellar, promptly coming to attention and saluting.

"Report to Colonel Bonham that the ambulance is ready."

"Yes, sir," answered the old man, saluting again and going out to find the Colonel.

"Do you know, Doctor Fenlon," said Miss MacCullagh, severely taking up the conversation, if her monologue could be so styled, just where it had been interrupted, "your careless indifference to dress is a thing of public comment at the Post and everywhere every one is talking about it. Look at you now."

"Well," expostulated the Doctor with his unvarying good humour, "it's a blessing they have something to talk about at the Post in these dull times, isn't it?"

Miss MacCullagh looked at him helplessly, hopelessly, beaten again by that irritating imperturbability. She turned and stalked toward the doorway again. She stopped as she reached the entrance and looked back once more.

"How can he expect any woman to take an interest in him?" she exclaimed half to herself and half to them all.

The Doctor, galvanized into sudden activity

by that extraordinary deliverance, at once started after her, all his nonchalance and indolence suddenly dissipated.

"Don't go 'way mad," he called after her as she swept outside and passed by the big window.

He stopped at the door a minute to apologise for his cigarette.

"Pardon, Miss Canby, but I understood smoking was permitted in this room."

"Everywhere and anywhere so far as I am concerned," she replied, lightly turning to Denton and leaving the Doctor to his own devices. "I believe you didn't care to dance with me," she pouted.

"You know better," said Denton, following her across the room. "You know deep down in your Arizona heart that I'd almost mutiny to be with you, don't you?"

"Why, how can I believe that when you don't even keep your engagement to dance with me?"

"I couldn't, I tell you," he urged.

"There, the music begins again," said the girl.

"Now, I suppose some one will come and claim me. How tiresome. The others are not so forgetful as you," she added quickly to cover up the admission.

"The Colonel's going to Los Angeles," ex-

plained Denton anxious to justify himself, "and I've had to make ready for him. But I'll stand guard under your window to-night till morning, and I'll spend every hour at your side to-morrow just as soon as I get off duty."

"I'll have to sleep to-morrow," said Bonita demurely, "if I stay awake all night."

"Lucky girl to be able," sighed Denton. "I've almost forgotten how."

"Forgotten how to sleep?" laughed the girl.

"Yes. I've forgotten everything but — you. I'm worse than no soldier at all. There's a girl's name sings in my ears so that I can't hear the bugle. Captain's sent me to headquarters twice in a week, and I have to take it because what would be the Colonel's answer if a man with one bar on his shoulder said, 'I forgot parade, sir, because I was dreaming of your wife's sister'?"

Bonita laughed lightly and yet she was immensely pleased.

"He'd probably answer that you hadn't forgotten to sleep, though."

"Day dreams, Miss —" he paused long enough to let the prefix be forgotten; "Bonita," he added tenderly. "Day dreams, night and day."

"I think that is something you learn at West Point," returned the girl airily. "All lieutenants

talk that way. I've noticed that," she went on with a great assumption of innocent bewilderment that quite drove him mad.

She sat down and looked up at him archly in her most fascinating and irritating way.

" 'All lieutenants talk that way' ! " quoted Denton fiercely.

" Every one."

" And to you? "

" Oh, to me, to all girls."

" Miss Canby! " exclaimed the Lieutenant, almost choking with jealousy and wrathful dismay.

" Of course. Did you ever see a girl near an army post that didn't have a gown trimmed with soldiers' buttons? "

" But what if she has? " said Denton, laying his hand on the back of her chair and bending over her.

" Every button is a vow," replied the girl quite oblivious, apparently, to her admirer's deep perturbation.

" Miss Bonita, if each vow of mine for you took a button, I'd have to report for duty in — er — pajamas."

The picture of Denton reporting to the Colonel in the airy garments of the night was too much for Bonita. She found it hard to be sentimental under

such circumstances and amid her merry laughter Captain Hodgman and Estrella Bonham entered the room. Hodgman seemed annoyed to find it occupied. He walked forward quickly, while the lady dropping his arm seated herself before the fire.

"Mr. Denton," said Hodgman, "want me?" his manner indicating no desire on his part for the Lieutenant's society.

"I am reporting to Colonel Bonham," said Denton, drawing himself up and saluting, his manner commonplace enough but the contempt and animosity he felt were quite apparent to his superior, as obvious in fact as were Hodgman's resentment and annoyance at his presence.

"Oh," he said curtly, turning and joining Estrella by the fire.

Bonita Canby had noticed Hodgman's manner to the younger man which was brusque and almost insulting. She saw Denton bite his lip to retain his self-control under the exacerbations of his captain.

"Have I made trouble for you?" she asked softly unheard by the others and, having no key to the situation, somewhat bewildered by it, since Denton could have no possible reason for jealousy of Hodgman about her.

Denton recovered himself instantly. It would never do to let Bonita suspect the purpose in his watchfulness over his superior officer, and more especially why he hated and despised him. No one must ever learn the reason for that.

"Trouble?" he answered softly, looking toward Hodgman and Estrella Bonham and then turning to her. "Not there," he pointed and then, laying his hand on his heart, he added, "but here."

Bonita laughed softly again, greatly relieved and put her fan on his lips. He took advantage of the opportunity to seize her upraised hand.

"Where are those precious side-combs of yours?" he whispered.

She smiled at him and slowly crossed the room to the big window. The infatuated lieutenant followed her and they were at once absorbed in their own sweet conversation. The music outside came to them more clearly through the window. They could not hear the two talking in low voice by the fireplace.

"Don't talk about it, Leonard," said Estrella nervously. "Don't mention it or refer to it until the Colonel has gone or I shall scream."

"But, Estrella, dear," said Hodgman softly, "is everything ready? You followed instructions?"

"Yes, everything, everything."

"Good! Now keep up your nerve," said Hodgman. "In fifty-six hours we'll be in New Orleans, and then —"

The music outside ceased again.

"Careful, careful," whispered Estrella, rising and stepping aside.

CHAPTER VI

In Which the Doctor Tactfully Calls Attention to Sergeant Kellar's Record with the Revolver

THE Colonel himself had actually caught some of the contagion of the hour it seemed. He had entered into the gaieties with some of the zest of the younger men. He had unbent to a degree and Miss MacCullagh had been his partner in the dance which had just stopped. The two had been laughing together over some jests which the Colonel had passed and which, in truth, the gentleman seemed to be enjoying more than the lady, for her delicate face was unusually red. As he came through the doorway from the porch, the Colonel's eyes fell upon his wife and Hodgman. His face changed a little. He had not the faintest suspicion that anything was wrong, that there was anything between the two, so cunningly had the man manœuvred, still he had noted that Hodgman had been a good deal in Mrs. Bonham's society of late and — But he laughed it off and turned to his companion. In a way quite fatherly, which was invariably very taking with young people, and which Estrella Bonham would have resented if she had cared, the commanding officer

patted the hand of the school teacher which rested on his sleeve.

"Estrella, the Doctor and Miss —" began the Colonel, evidently bent upon a continuance of his bantering.

"Now, Colonel," interrupted the young woman, turning a little redder if possible in spite of her amusement.

"Yes, dear," said Estrella, stepping forward, conscious that she was frightfully pale and striving as best she could to assume the indifferent yet amused air that her husband's jesting seemed to call for.

The embarrassed school teacher meanwhile sought to pull her hand away from the detaining clasp of the Colonel and Estrella Bonham was never so thankful for the diversion, for her husband, engrossed in the little struggle, did not look at her closely at the moment.

"Miss MacCullagh hasn't picked out an officer for her very own yet," said the Colonel. "Now I say that a girl who can't find a fellow in the Eleventh, doesn't deserve one. We've got them of all sizes and sorts and shapes, let alone ages. I've even offered her a captain, to say nothing of the Doctor, who seemed to have the call, but —"

"It isn't fair, is it," protested Miss MacCul-

lagh, "for the Colonel to tease me so? The truth is they are all so fascinating I can't choose." She broke off suddenly, anxious to get away, her womanly intuition sensing a scene of some sort. "Oh, there's Bonita in the window. I want to speak to her," she added as she dropped the Colonel's arm and crossed over to the window.

Two or three of the other officers sauntered into the room during the intermission. Hallock and Young turned toward Denton and the two ladies. The tête-à-tête the absorbed young lieutenant had enjoyed with Bonita Canby was of necessity broken off. He turned on his heel and for the first time, apparently, became conscious of the presence of the Colonel. He remembered that he had come there with a message. He stepped toward him and saluted him, flushing with embarrassment at his forgetfulness.

"Colonel," he began.

"Yes?" said the older officer, looking at him keenly, some little suspicion of him also in mind; indeed the Colonel was fast degenerating into a mood of universal suspicion in the growing estrangement between him and his wife.

"Ambulance is ready, sir."

"Ah, and you were reporting it to Miss Canby,

were you?" the Post Commander retorted with an effort at pleasantry.

"I was waiting for you here, sir," answered Denton more confused than ever.

"Well, it's all right. I know it's ready. By the way, Mr. Denton, why haven't you been dancing?"

"Duty, sir," replied Denton stiffly. "Officer of the day. Couldn't get away."

"Ah," said the Colonel drily. "I see, your tour of duty brings you here, however."

"Anything more, sir?" asked Denton, feeling not a little uncomfortable.

"No."

Denton saluted, turned to go out but stopped again by the side of the irresistible Bonita, where he remained for the moment apparently quite deaf to duty's imperative call!

"Well, my dear," said the Commanding Officer, turning to his wife, "you see the ambulance is here and if I am to catch the train I must start at once. I must be excused. You young folks'll have to get along without me for the balance of the evening, or the morning, I should say."

"Will you have the ambulance here or at headquarters, sir?" asked Denton.

"You can have it sent here," answered the Colonel.

The young lieutenant saluted, turned on his heel and, not daring to stay longer, walked out with military abruptness.

"Mr. Hallock," said the Colonel as he stared after the departing figure, "what's the matter with Harry Denton?"

Hallock bit his lip to stifle a smile.

"Oh, nothing serious I think, sir," he answered.

"Doesn't look happy lately," continued the Colonel.

"Whatever it is," chimed in Lieutenant Young, "I don't think it will amount to much, sir."

"I want you junior officers to understand," began the Colonel after a little pause, and apparently quite irrelevantly, "that I haven't any favourite officer in my regiment. Even my adjutant's a matter of business. But, Bonita," he went on turning to the girl, "I have a favourite protégé. Denton's father and I were in the Washita Campaign, made a ride with important papers from Custer to Miles that you'll find in the printed records of the War Department. We finished by trotting—bang—into Miles's dining room, on the same horse. Denton insensible—me,

crazy — horse dying. Papers in Denton's water-soaked boot — cut it off —" He stopped, thinking hard for a moment as the memory of that mad ride and desperate fighting to get through came back to him. "And right now," he began slowly, "I'd be willing to — Well, just understand, I like his boy. Ah, Fenlon, I am just talking about Denton," he continued as the fat surgeon ambled into the room. "I want to know what is the matter with him. You may know something about it, Doctor. Come, tell it."

"H'm," said Miss MacCullagh, "most unusual for the Doctor to —"

"I don't believe it's in my department, Colonel," interposed the Doctor, shooting a baleful glance at the school teacher amid a general laugh.

"But what is it?" asked the Commanding Officer insistently.

"I can tell you, Colonel," said Miss MacCullagh, "and I think I can guess the reason for Doctor Fenlon's singular reticence."

"Well, what is it?"

"Poker!" answered the school teacher severely. "It's that dreadful game you permit at the Officers' Club."

"Poker?" said the Colonel thoughtfully.

"Why, I hadn't noticed Harry losing much."

"Only a few hundred, I believe," said the Doctor carelessly, "but —"

"A few hundred!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Gad!"

"I don't think it's the money that's troubling him, Colonel," said the Doctor. "Denton's not like the rest of us about that."

"I should say not," said his superior, "if he doesn't mind the money."

"He doesn't like merely vegetating," continued the surgeon. "I think Denton'd be happier in some large business, where his activity could be engaged. He says a man rusts out in the army. If there was a call to arms now, a chance for active service —"

"Gad!" said the Colonel. "If somebody in Washington had a little backbone, we wouldn't be rusting and I am thinking that before long we'll be headed for Caribbean shores if things don't get better in Cuba soon. Well, come, little girl," he said to Estrella, dismissing Denton from his thoughts, "I'll change my duds, pack my bag, and —"

"Gentlemen, excuse me," said his wife as she followed the Colonel off toward the sleeping portion of the quarters.

"Guess it's about time for us all to go," said

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Hodgman who had stood silently in the background, apparently the picture of indifference yet letting nothing at all escape his sharp eyes. "Must be one o'clock and —"

"Yes, nearly," said the Doctor, sitting down by the fire but turning his chair to face the others.

"Nonsense," cried young Hallock, "the night's young yet. Miss Canby, may I have a walk with you in the patio?"

"Certainly you may," said Bonita. "And tell me something about Mr. Denton's losses. I am curious," which was putting it mildly, for her interest was overwhelming, to say nothing of her anxiety.

"Miss MacCullagh, the next is ours, I believe," said Young, offering his arm and leaving the Doctor and the Captain together.

"Let me see," said the Doctor, "what was the exact extent of Denton's losses, Hodgman? A few hundred would cover it, wouldn't it?"

"Cover what?" asked the other.

"His losses at poker."

"How should I know?" said Hodgman indifferently, although he had been Denton's antagonist and was his chief creditor.

"Oh, then he's paid, has he?" said the Doctor, who knew much more than Hodgman suspected.

"Thought you kept a record. Oh, don't go," he continued as the Captain started toward the door.

"Think I will," said the Captain lightly.

"It's getting late."

"But I want a word or two with you," persisted the Doctor, "and now's as good a time as any."

"Poker and all that?" sneered the other a little uneasily.

"No."

"Going to preach a sermon to me," said Hodgman, "on —"

"Woman," interrupted the Doctor quietly.

"Woman!" exclaimed Hodgman sharply, suddenly on the alert. He stared at the Doctor, finding a certain fascination in the grave nod of assent. "What woman, pray?" he asked.

"Lena," said the Doctor.

"Oh," said Hodgman apparently greatly relieved, for he had expected another name and yet, from one point of view, this was just as bad. He played for time, wondering what the other knew and how. "Lena! — Lena who?" he asked.

"You know."

"I do, do I?"

"None better," said the Doctor decisively.

"But if you wish particulars, Sergeant Kellar's daughter."

"Well, what about her?" asked Hodgman impatiently.

"It's a professional secret," answered the Doctor, "but I had permission to speak of it to one person and that person is you."

"Me?"

"She says it's your secret, too."

Hodgman stared hard at the surgeon. He decided to brazen it out.

"Really, I don't know what you mean," he said.

"And you're a cavalryman," sneered the Doctor with deep and cutting contempt. "Well, I'll be plain with you, Captain Hodgman. There's a little guest at the Roman Catholic Nursery in El Paso. I told them his board would be paid."

"Oh," said Hodgman as if suddenly illuminated, "I see! I suppose we all contribute to his support?"

Doctor Fenlon threw his cigarette into the fireplace viciously. He rose to his feet, his usually placid, pleasant face dark with anger.

"That's mighty nasty, Hodgman, but you'll have to put up alone just the same," he said with deliberate emphasis and unmistakable meaning.

"Rot!" said Hodgman with contemptuous assurance. "Why should I?"

"Well, for one reason," said the Doctor more easily, "Sergeant Kellar holds the sharp-shooter's medal for the regiment, he loves Lena and if he found out that you —"

At this moment the Sergeant came in. He saluted the two officers, walked over to the side window and began to draw the curtain preparatory to closing up.

"We were just speaking of you, Sergeant. Closing up?" asked the Doctor, grimly enjoying the situation and not wishing Hodgman to lose any of it.

"Only dis side, sir," said Kellar. "Dance is over. Colonel goes away besides and de next vill be de last number."

"Yes? Er — ah — Sergeant," continued the Doctor, playing as it were with his victim, "I want to ask you a question. Are you as good with a six-shooter as you are with the carbine?"

"No, sir," answered Kellar, going on with his work. "Two men better dan me vid six-shooters."

"Oh, only two, eh?" continued the Doctor, watching Hodgman narrowly.

"Yes, sir," returned Kellar. "Lieutenant Denton and Private Kane of B Troop."

"What did I tell you, Hodgman?" said the Doctor as Lena followed her father into the room.

"You can go to hell, Fenlon," said Hodgman very low and passionately, turning on his heel and rushing from the room.

"Will you put that permission in writing, Captain?" shouted the usually imperturbable Doctor in a gust of temper, following the disappearing Hodgman out of the door.

CHAPTER VII

Estrella Bonham Does Not Find the Primrose Path so Easy a Way as She Fancied

KELLAR stared after the two men in some bewilderment. They had made no attempt whatever to disguise their anger. For once, the cool-headed physician had allowed his temper to get the upper hand of him. That insulting insinuation against the regiment, and more particularly against the poor girl who had trusted him to her ruin, by Hodgman who of all men knew how groundless it was, had broken up his ordinary cool composure. The old Sergeant without any clue to their action was greatly surprised and mystified.

"Vell," he said, "dey can't fight at de Colonel's dance any vay."

He shrugged his shoulders, turned about to face his daughter Lena, white and agitated as always by the presence of Hodgman, although now she had further cause for excitement. Kellar looked at her suspiciously.

"Vat's de matter, Lena?" he asked sternly.

"Father," began the girl, "I have found a —" she hesitated.

"Yes, yes," said her father impatiently.

"I have found a letter."

"Letter? Vat letter?" asked Kellar, who had little interest in so trivial a matter as lost correspondence apparently.

"From the Captain."

"Vat Captain?"

"That one," said Lena, nodding her head in the direction of the doorway.

"A letter from him to who?"

"To the missus, the Colonel's wife. I saw him hand it to her. She dropped it after a while, and I picked it up."

"Vell?"

"I read it," faltered Lena. "I couldn't help it. It was open and I—"

"Vell, Lena," said the Sergeant severely, "dat is none of your business. Vat everybody talks in de Post, you do not hear. If an old man like de Colonel marries his granddaughter, let 'em talk, let 'em talk. I haf told you dis before. You should not haf read de letter."

"But, they are going," interposed Lena bravely, although she quailed under the severe glance of her stern old father.

"Who are going and vere?" asked the Sergeant.

"The Colonel's wife and —"

"Oh, no, no, only the Colonel," interrupted her father, shaking his head over what he believed to be the stupidity of his daughter and turning away.

"But afterwards," persisted the girl, catching his arm, "she is going with the Captain. I know it. It's in the letter."

Kellar stopped as if petrified.

"Stop!" he whispered. "Vell, it is not our business. Ve must pretend not to know, and ven dey come back, still ve are not to know — noding, noding."

"But, they are not coming back," said Lena.

"Not coming back!"

"No, the letter says it. They are going away — forever."

"You talk foolishness," said the old man, not yet appreciating the significance of his daughter's words. "Leave forever? Leave a Captain's pay?"

"But she is rich, she has money, plenty," urged Lena, who knew the Captain thoroughly, her own wretched misadventure having enlightened her as to his probable motives. "Every jewel is packed. I know."

"And that letter?"

"Here it is."

She extended it to him. Kellar took it, read a sentence or two and stared at the rest in petrified amazement. He knew now. There was no mistaking the earnestness and sincerity of Lena's voice and bearing and the letter abundantly justified them. Before the sorely puzzled veteran could decide upon the proper course in such a fearful emergency, with which he hardly felt competent to deal, the Colonel and Estrella came into the room. The Colonel was garbed for the journey. With the swiftness of thought itself, Lena snatched the letter from her father's hand and concealed it. The bewildered Sergeant came to attention and saluted, glad for the interruption.

"Sergeant," said the Colonel, noticing nothing, indeed he had eyes for no one but the young wife he was leaving, "have my bag put in the ambulance."

"Is it in de hall, sir?" asked Kellar.

"It's in my room, the big bag there. Lena knows it. She'll show you."

"Frank, dear, you'll be careful, won't you?" began the wife nervously, the situation and what was toward increasing her natural agitation.

"Why, little girl, what's the matter to-night?" asked her husband, amused yet pleased with this unwonted solicitude. "Careful? Pullman car,

fine hotel, for an old campaigner like me who needs only a blanket! There goes the music again. When will these youngsters ever stop dancing?"

"Yes, I know," continued Mrs. Bonham. "All those luxuries to which you are not accustomed, as you say, may make you careless. I don't want anything to happen to you. I want you to live for years and years —" she stopped and looked down — "and forget what a foolish girl you married," she concluded in a trembling, agitated voice.

There was something about the Colonel at that fateful hour, his good humour and geniality, his absolute trust in her, his entire lack of suspicion as to what had gone on before or what was about to take place, which moved her strangely; more deeply, indeed, than all his self-sacrificing, self-denying devotion had ever affected her. She had never loved him and she did not love him then — she thought — but perhaps never before had she come so near to a proper and adequate response to his own feeling for her; and yet, with a curious feminine perversity quite understandable, she entertained no thought of changing her purpose then. It was too late, she fancied. She had to go on with it now, she decided. Yet, there was

no hypocrisy in her solicitude and care either, and its genuineness touched the officer to whom she was the very light of life itself.

"Foolish girl! You?" he began, smiling at her tenderly. "Here, none of that," he continued as she put her hand over her eyes partly because she was afraid to look at him — a belated but none the less genuine touch of shame! — and partly to hide strange tears that would fain appear. "You mustn't think that because I so rarely dance, that I think dancing's foolish. Gad! I've danced all night and ridden both days to do it. Why, Estrella, you never take a step or laugh a note, that your silly old martinet of a husband doesn't skip and laugh with you in his heart. But, by jingo! after my age, you can't two-step this outline of mine around, except by platoon."

He ended this, for him, unusually frank declaration, with a little outburst of pleased laughter as if at his own humorous conceit, but really because his wife's anxiety made him so happy.

"It isn't that," said Estrella, her face still averted, her voice low and strained, "but when you are away and you think about me, I want you to know that I — respected you more than any one in the world and that I think you are noble and good and —"

The Colonel laughed again in pure joy of heart. This wasn't love exactly, at least not like his own, but it was more evidence of abiding affection than he had ever received before; it indicated a heart moving in the right direction and he was glad.

"Help — help! Officer of the guard!" he said like a light-hearted boy, and then he bent his head and kissed her cheek.

But Estrella was not to be put off. That kiss had affected her strangely again for a moment — but what was the use? It was settled. She spoke on, but more gently if possible than before.

"And — and — any mistakes I make are because I have been spoiled and have always had my own way,— and —"

"Pardon, Colonel," said Denton, coming briskly into the room, "but I had to put the mules to the ambulance. That west-bound train goes through at three-thirty, and two hours and a half isn't too much for twenty miles, sir."

"Right," said the Colonel decidedly.

He took his wife in his arms. Her head was still bent. The Colonel wanted to kiss her upon the lips but there was a strange deference, almost a timidity, in his bearing toward her always, and never more than to-night. He would take no ad-

vantage of a complaisant mood. This time he touched his lips reverently to her bended head.

"Good-bye," he said and then like a true military man, he turned abruptly on his heel and plunged through the door.

He went away in better heart than in many a day. Estrella had showed him more tenderness, more consideration, that night than in all the time they had been married. He wondered if it was because she had been dancing so much while he merely looked on. He wondered what compunction had stirred her. Was it the reward of his patient devotion? Was it coming at last? He flattered himself that it must be that. Whom the gods destroy they first make mad. The Colonel was a little mad that night. Estrella stared after him, a look of terror in her face. She heard him call on his way across the patio,

"Good-bye, Bonita. You'll have to make it a wing shot if you want to kiss me."

Denton, after a sharp glance at Mrs. Bonham and a rather abrupt bow, followed his commanding officer to the door and stood looking. As he watched, Estrella came to his side and then passed him and went out on the porch. Some irresistible impulse to see the last of the gallant man upon whom she would never again look with the eyes

of his honoured wife, drew her there. Denton drew aside to let her pass, glad for her movement. The next instant he would have followed her but was stopped by the Sergeant who had taken the Colonel's bag to the ambulance according to orders and was now returning, having decided upon a course of action.

"Lieutenant Denton," said the old man gruffly.

"Please one minute, sir."

"Well?" said Denton, turning and walking back into the room, in compliance with a suggestive gesture from the Sergeant, who did not want the watcher without the door to overhear.

"My Lena found this letter here, to-night, sir," said old Kellar, extending the crumpled paper, which his daughter had returned to him.

"Whose is it?" asked Denton suspiciously, not offering to take it.

"Lena saw the Captain give it to de missus. She tinks dey mean to go to-night."

"I don't understand," said Denton, although in truth he began to understand too well.

"Read, sir."

"I can't read somebody else's letter."

"You must. I haf read. De Colonel's wife —"

"What do you mean, Kellar?"

"She run away," answered the veteran briefly.

"Impossible!"

"It is true. Her horse is saddled. Lena says her things are packed to travel. Vill de Lieutenant read? It is for de honour of de Colonel," continued the old Sergeant imperatively.

Thus adjured, Denton extended his hand, took the letter and glanced at the contents. One look was enough. Yet he temporised. It was too hideous. It could not be. There must be some explanation. He would not believe. Although he had no doubt as to who had written it and to whom it had been given, he said:

"Why, there is no name or address, it — it — God Almighty!" he exclaimed, abandoning a pretence it were folly to maintain, as he crushed the letter in his hand.

"Lieutenant," continued the Sergeant.

Denton glanced at him, almost minded to do to him as Pharaoh did to the bearers of evil tidings.

"What next?"

"Lena she say dere's a roll of diamonds in a buckskin bag as big as my wrist. Dey take dem wid dem."

"God!" cried Denton, more and more appalled as the extent of the treachery came to be

realised. "Don't speak of this to any one, Sergeant. I'll find —"

"Well," said Bonita, coming smiling into the room, of course utterly unconscious of anything wrong. "The Colonel's gone, Mr. Denton, and it seems as if the fun had all gone with him."

The girl stared a moment and then shivered slightly. There was something tragic, terrible, in the air. What was the matter? Denton stood like a statue, for the first time since he had met her almost indifferent to her presence. She could not allow that, she decided.

"Mr. Denton," she said sharply.

"I beg your pardon," he answered, recovering himself with difficulty. "Yes, a good deal of the fun has gone out of the night."

He thrust the letter into the breast pocket of his jacket, and turned away from the piqued and astonished girl. This was no time for his own love making.

"Any orders, sir?" asked Kellar.

"No," said Denton. "That's all, Sergeant."

But that was not all for old Kellar, for the Battalion Sergeant-Major suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Sergeant Kellar," he said, "Sergeant of the Guard is sick. You'll have to take his place."

"All right," said Kellar. "It's a dog's life in the army," he grumbled as he went out.

"Mr. Denton," said Bonita, who had been regarding him with growing indignation and resentment, "is the officer-of-the-day business such a depressing thing?"

"Pardon me," said Denton again roused out of a study which was almost a stupor.

He was face to face with a problem which was almost too much to grapple with in any way that would not cause a scandal; and he could give no time to Bonita now, much as he loved her.

"Oh, no," he answered, "but I'm a trifle preoccupied, that's all."

"So I see."

"The work is rather a matter of form in peace times, this officer-of-the-day business," he blundered on. "The Colonel goes in heavily for discipline, and I think he likes us closely to observe the regulations."

"He likes you," said Bonita a little grudgingly.

"I know that," was the answer and with it came an increased resolution to save Estrella for the Colonel's sake as well as for her own. "Perhaps you know that he got me my appointment to the Academy?"

"Did he?"

"Been kind of a father to me always," said Denton with deep feeling, the thought of what was being prepared by the two traitors for his grey-headed beloved Commander almost making him ill. "I couldn't begin to tell you all that Colonel Bonham has done for me and mine. As for me, I would —"

What he would have done or would do for the Colonel was never told, for at that moment Captain Hodgman entered the room. He had put off his uniform and was now dressed in civilian clothes.

"Why, Captain!" exclaimed Bonita, "in citizen's dress and —"

"Yes," said Hodgman impatiently. He had not expected to meet them there and had hoped that Estrella would be there and ready. "At first I thought I'd ride as far as the village with the Colonel, but er — I — changed my mind," he went on lamely.

Denton, with all the rage and resentment in his heart risen to the surface, growled out,

"Couldn't you do that in uniform?"

From a subordinate to a superior, from a lieutenant to a captain, it was a surprising remark, and its tone was amazingly blunt and insulting.

"Mr. Denton!" cried Hodgman severely, greatly surprised.

There was no love lost between the two officers but there had never been anything like this before, and Hodgman, having no inkling of the lost letter and Denton's possession of it, could not understand it. Denton pulled himself together, saluted, all soldierly obedience not yet dead within him.

"Captain Hodgman."

Hodgman stared at him a moment, a retort, an insult, trembling on his lips. He thought better of it. What was the use? In a short time he would be away from it all. What did he care for the Lieutenant? His insubordination would amount to nothing to Hodgman to-morrow. He turned his back on the young officer.

"I am in command of the Post now that the Colonel has gone. Send word to that bandmaster to turn in. Get the Post quiet as soon as possible," was all he said over his shoulder.

"Yes, sir," said Denton, turning on his heel, not yet having settled on the right course in his own mind, but more than ever resolved upon interference to prevent Estrella's departure.

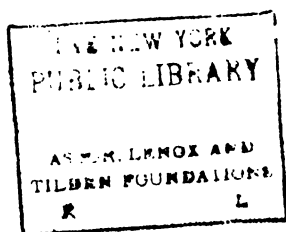
"Take me with you, Mr. Denton," said Bonita half in jest, half in earnest, slipping her arm in his

and going out with him. "Take me with you. Captain Hodgman quite frightens me."

"My God! what a finish this is," said Hodgman to himself after the others had gone. "Reputation, commission, everything. But after twenty years in this beastly service with its promotions and favouritism, the lick-spittles sent to the seashore, and I in this sage-brush and alkali. And now this Dutch girl with more trouble for me. Well, Estrella's worth it. God, what a woman! And with her half million clear we can manage," he added with a low and evil laugh.



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"AH! WHAT'S YOUR HURRY?"



CHAPTER VIII

How Lieutenant Denton Balked the Plans of a Blackguard and a Traitor

ALTHOUGH he was so keenly impatient, Captain Hodgman had not long to wait. He stood by the fireplace nervously smoking a cigarette he had lighted, until he heard a sound in the bedroom across the hall to the right. He lifted his head.

"That's her step," he murmured, dropping his cigarette into the fireplace and turning to face the door with unconcealed eagerness in which there was not a little hidden anxiety, for he would not be quite sure of this woman until they were away.

"Leonard," said Mrs. Bonham softly, coming into the room with her cloak on her arm, her hat in her hand.

"Estrella," said the Captain, springing toward her with outstretched arms.

"Alone?" she asked, nervously giving him her free hand and dropping her hat in a chair.

"Alone, as you see."

"It's awful, isn't it?" she followed as he drew her on.

She sat down in the big chair by the fire and

buried her head in her hands resting on the arms of the chair.

"What is awful?" he asked, bending over her.

"To go — to leave all — to break away."

She looked up at him almost in terror.

"Awful?" said Hodgman, tenderly gazing down at her, and alarmed at her mood. Was he going to lose her now, he wondered anxiously? "Do you think it is? To me, it is life — with you."

"But he doesn't dream of it. And he's been so good to me. Oh, if I had never known you, Leonard."

She buried her face in her hands again, her body shook with the violence of her emotions. Now that the time had come it was not so easy as it had seemed before.

"But you do know me, dearest. You knew me as soon as you knew him. But he had an eagle on his shoulder, and youth and love and devotion could not count against all that," he urged in his rich low passionate voice.

"Haven't they counted, Leonard? Haven't they?" asked the woman hysterically. "Am I not giving my immortal soul to you for them?"

"Forgive me," said the Captain penitently.

"We are both giving up everything for each other."

His acting, had there been an impartial witness, would have been pronounced admirable. And indeed it was not all acting either, for as much as in him lay, he loved the woman, probably would have loved her if she had been poor, although in that event things would never have come to the present pass.

"Estrella," suddenly called Bonita, reappearing in the doorway.

Hodgman started back with a muttered oath at the interruption.

"They are all gone," said the young girl, drawing near to her sister, "and —"

"Yes, dear," answered Estrella, dropping her cloak on the chair and rising, "it has been a long gay evening for you and —"

"Why, what's the matter, Estrella? Have you —" began Bonita, surveying her elder sister narrowly.

"Oh, only a little tired, dear," answered the other, turning from the light. "Come, say good night to the Captain and go to your room."

"Have a good night's rest, Miss Bonita," said Hodgman cordially. "You know I am in command of the Post and those are my orders."

"Thank you," said Bonita rather coldly.

"Good night, Miss Bonita," continued the Captain, shaking her hand. "I congratulate you on your evening. You know the party was for you."

"Wasn't it gorgeous?" she asked, smiling deliciously at so many pleasant recollections.

"Good night, dear," said Estrella, kissing Bonita and anxious to get her away, gently moving her toward the rooms to the right, the sleeping quarters.

"Good night," said Bonita. "I say, Estrella, of course, you're the chaperone, I know, but if it's so late that I've got to go to bed, isn't it a shade late for married chaperones and — er — captains with black moustaches?"

"Bonita," said Estrella somewhat severely, "you don't know what you're saying. The Captain is in command of the Post now, and there are many important matters to discuss."

"Oh, excuse me," said Bonita not at all abashed.

There was something wrong, something which she did not understand but just what she could not say. Well, she could not mend matters, she decided. She turned and walked quickly to the door, saluted, and then, seeing the anxiety and annoyance in the faces of the two, she laughed to cover

her embarrassment, and ran out. Estrella burst into tears. Hodgman carefully closed the door of the room.

"You won't get very far, Estrella, on that kind of mettle," he observed with some displeasure.

"No, I suppose not," answered the woman, biting her lip and brushing away her tears. "Is it best to go now? Is this the time?"

"The only time," urged Hodgman emphatically. "This trip of the Colonel's is a God-send," he went on quite unconscious of his blasphemy. "Los Angeles; a conference of the ranking officers of this department."

"Well?"

"I think they are getting ready for war. The talk is about over. We may be ordered to the front any day and then —"

"There might be glory for you in that case," said Estrella.

Hodgman shook his head.

"I have a feeling that I should never come back," he said gloomily. "Officers are shining marks. Once gone, we should meet no more. We have to decide now." He waited impatiently. "But if you haven't the courage, if you don't love —" he began.

"There," said Estrella, stoutly rising to her

feet, "I'm as brave as you are, now," which was indeed more true than she knew.

"Good!" said Hodgman, his face lighting. "Now get ready for the ride."

"I have only my gown to change and —"

"But your personal effects, the — the — er — jewels," said Hodgman, averting his gaze.

"Here," said Estrella, taking a rolled-up package from her breast, a little reproach in her voice that he had mentioned them, his recollection evidently jarring her soul.

"Don't resent my remembering them," said the Captain, touched on the raw by her look and tone, "because they're all we shall have with which to travel. You are taking a poor man, when I give up my captaincy I shall have nothing but you. Besides, you ordered them brought here from the bank in the town, for to-night."

"Of course, Leonard, I understand," said the woman. "Forgive my little smile. But you see I resent anything that seems to take your thought away from me and — I'm glad you have nothing but me. Here, take them," she continued, thrusting the package toward him.

"No," said Hodgman gloomily but with diabolic cleverness, "let's call it off before it's too

late. I'm too poor. You are giving up too much."

"No," said Estrella deeply touched by what she believed to be evidence of magnanimity and self-abnegation, for her jewels were of great value. She followed him as he stalked away from her. She forced the package into his hands. "I know you care for nothing but me. Now say you forgive me and take them. Having you, I am the richest of women. What are jewels or anything compared to our love?"

"Oh, well," said Hodgman, taking the packet as if with the greatest reluctance.

"Now, don't pout, Leonard," said the woman nervously, "or I shall break down. I can't stand anything more."

"I won't," said Hodgman, his face more cheerful since he had succeeded so well, "and hurry. The sooner we get away the better. I'll make haste with my own horse, and look after yours also."

Hodgman turned to the door leading out upon the porch. Estrella followed him there and with her hand fondly touched his shoulder. Hodgman fumbled with the lock a moment, threw open the door and there in the entrance stood Denton,

his face grim and threatening like that of a destroying angel!

The Captain started back in surprise at the sight. Estrella Bonham broke into a little cry of alarm.

"Well, Mr. Denton, what are you doing here?" said Hodgman fiercely.

"An order came to C Troop to saddle your horse," was the equally fierce answer.

Question and answer came like the thrust and parry of swordsmen in the conversation that followed.

"Well?" said the Captain.

"I countermanded the order."

"The order was mine."

"I countermanded it."

"You!"

"Yes, emphatically."

"And by what authority?"

"As officer-of-the-day."

"I am your Captain and in command of the Post."

"Still," said the Lieutenant with adamant firmness, "the horse will not be taken from the stables."

"This is flagrant disobedience of orders," said Hodgman furiously.



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"It is more than that if you persist," said Denton with equal fury.

All the traditions of the service had been thrown to the winds, all the soldierly habits of the army had been forgotten. The young man was aflame to protect his Colonel and his Colonel's wife from a scoundrel, a thief, a blackguard, a disgrace to the uniform he wore.

"What do you mean?" cried Hodgman.

Denton's hand went to his revolver hanging by his side. His fingers closed about the butt.

"I mean death," he said.

"Death!" exclaimed the woman. "Leonard!"

"Mr. Denton," at last said Hodgman more coolly — to do him justice he was no coward — "you are using impossible language to your commanding officer. You have your hand upon your revolver."

"Yes," said Denton, "and it is drawn."

He suited the action to the word. The barrel of the pistol was pointed straight at Hodgman's heart and the two men were as close together as they could stand. The weapon did not waver either. If there were no other way he could stop the elopement, he could kill the scoundrel out of hand.

"Lieutenant Denton!" cried the woman, trying to interpose. "Remember you are in your Colonel's house."

Denton never took his eyes off of Hodgman,

"I am glad you remember it, Madam. I am in my Colonel's house, so is this man. I have here his letter, arranging this departure. Like a coward and a traitor and a thief, he has beguiled you into this and if he tries it, I am here to kill him."

"No, no!" cried Estrella. "Don't. Oh, Denton, don't. Think of the scandal. Think, think, of Bonita."

It was the best appeal she could make to him in her mad terror.

"I am thinking of Bonita," replied Denton, "but most of all, I think of that brave old soldier to whom I owe almost my existence, to whom, as Colonel of my regiment, I owe allegiance — and I swear to God, Hodgman, if you attempt to put this wrong upon him, I'll kill you where you stand."

"You've got the drop on me, Denton," said Hodgman, "and I think you're fool enough to shoot. As this lady's name is involved, I've got to do what you say, I suppose."

"Then go," said Denton, stepping aside to

leave the way clear but still carefully keeping the Captain covered.

"Go where? To my quarters?"

"To hell if you want to, where you belong, as you told the Doctor," was the quick answer.

There was nothing to it for Hodgman but to go. He glanced at Estrella who stood with averted head, took a step, shot another glance at the young man still pointing the revolver at him. He was helpless. He fairly gnashed his teeth with rage but could do nothing. He stepped slowly toward the door, quite aware what a sorry figure he was making.

"Wait," said Denton. "There are some jewels, wrapped in a piece of chamois skin. I'll take those before you go."

Hodgman clenched his hands and took a step toward Denton.

"I haven't —" he began.

"That lie won't serve you," interrupted the Lieutenant. "You know you've got them."

With a gesture of rage and a muttered oath, Hodgman tore the package from his breast and handed it to him.

"I was just as sure he had them as I was that he'd ordered the horses, Mrs. Bonham. Your money, your jewels, that's all he wants."

"No, no!" cried Estrella, looking hard at her lover, and then some illumination seemed to come to her.

In the light of all the tragic happenings and the emotions of the moment, she suddenly and for the first time, saw Hodgman in his true colours. His expression of baffled rage, and greed and hate, was unmistakable. She stared at him as one fascinated.

"The world ought to pity a woman who has money," she said at last with the bitterness of despair and humiliation in her voice.

"You're devilish careful to have your gun when you make this play, aren't you, Denton?" said Hodgman tauntingly to the other. "I am, as you see, unarmed."

"I don't need any gun with you," answered Denton, shoving his weapon into its holster and facing him with clenched fists. "Been a black-guard always; nearly expelled from the Corps of Cadets; mixed up nastily with a girl after that according to the Leavenworth papers; and even now there's a woman in this very Post — I'll tell it now — with a greater claim on him than yours, Mrs. Bonham," he added, turning squarely to her.

"You pup!" cried Hodgman fairly goaded into madness.

"You mean, who?" asked Estrella, whose enlightenment was certainly proceeding rapidly.

"That little girl of Kellar's," answered Denton ruthlessly.

Mrs. Bonham put her hand upon her breast and started back.

"Mrs. Bonham," began Hodgman passionately. He stepped nearer to her, resolved it seemed upon one more effort in spite of the odds against him.

"No, no!" said Estrella, shrinking back in horror and disgust. "I know it is true."

She leaned her head upon the mantel and burst into dry sobs which shook her terribly. She was absolutely convinced that her idol not only had feet of clay, but that there was no sound spot in the whole body of it.

"Look at me," persisted Hodgman. "I—"

But Denton had had enough. He stepped between the two.

"She won't look at you," he said, "but I will. Now go!"

There was nothing more that Hodgman could do. Denton was younger, not dissipated, stronger. The Captain knew he would come off second best in any sort of an encounter. He could not get at Estrella Bonham with Denton

there. He realised that his power over her was gone. He turned away, murder in his heart. He stopped in the doorway to fire this parting shot.

"If Kellar's loose daughter told all she knows, Mrs. Bonham, this young man might not stand so highly with —"

Denton leaped toward him.

"With Bonita," Hodgman added before he could be stopped.

The Lieutenant struck the Captain on the mouth with his open hand.

"That lady's name is not for your lips," he said with a fierceness and an intensity which he had hitherto not displayed.

Hodgman shrank back through the door from the light blow.

"It's a fight to a finish," he hissed out as Denton slammed the door after him.

CHAPTER IX

In Which Colonel Bonham Fails to Recognise a Hero and Finds Only a Thief, as he Believes

"Now," said Denton, speaking a little more gently and turning to Mrs. Bonham who still stood, her face in her hands on the mantel, "I want your parole, too."

"Oh, Mr. Denton," answered the woman hopelessly, "you don't understand. You don't know how desperate a woman may become; and it sounds empty and foolish as an excuse to say that this thing has grown, grown so gradually that the woman herself can't quite understand it, and yet —" Her voice had been low and hopeless. She stopped. Denton waited for her, his heart full of compassion and yet not without its measure of human scorn, the scorn of strength for weakness before that strength itself has been tried.

Mrs. Bonham had not looked at the Lieutenant but now she suddenly lifted her head and faced him and burst out:

"And yet, it's as irresistible as any dreadful fate that comes to you in a dream. The will is paralysed; your feet don't step where you mean

they should go. Oh, I can't explain it, and I know I seem like a wilfully wicked woman, and I have been, I have thrown away everything for — for — that —”

She looked in the direction of the door, her mind full of the sorry picture made by her lover who had also been the lover of the Sergeant's daughter, and God only knew how many other deceived women, who had so cleverly played upon her sympathies, who had taken her jewels with herself, who — Her body shook with that awful dry sobbing again. Her knees gave way. She sank down in the chair, Denton assisting her, and she hid her face in her hands again as if she would hide herself from the world, the world from herself.

“I think I understand, Mrs. Bonham,” said Denton sympathetically.

To have loved some one else, being married, was bad enough, but to have loved so worthless a scoundrel as Hodgman made it, if possible, worse. The young man was filled with great pity for the wretched woman. He racked his brains for something to say and, as usual in such instances, he was at a loss, and yet perhaps the commonplaces that came were the best things under the tragic circumstances.

"I tried to knock off whiskey once, and it was a deuce of a pull," he went on. "Used to say to myself, 'I'll bet I won't drink this,' even while I was pouring it out." He laughed, forcing himself to do so. "Finally got so I'd bet I hadn't drunk it, after I had. Then one day the Colonel,"—he noticed the woman wince at the word—"slapped me on the back and told me to pull up. I stumbled occasionally afterwards, but he put his arm around me, and — and — Well now, I go in for tennis — and tea." He laughed. "Do you know," he went on clumsily enough but with good heart and intention, "most anybody can pull up if the Colonel's with them."

"Oh," cried Estrella, rising, flinging her hands out. "You're talking about him now just to break my heart."

Some impulse led her to the deep embrasured window, the one looking on the parade, not the one on the side overlooking the porch and patio. She pulled the curtains a little apart and stared out through the moonlight over the parade ground and the prairie beyond where her husband had gone.

"Yes," said Denton, and then coming to a sudden resolution he added seriously, "It ought to break your heart, Mrs. Bonham. He's fifty-

two, but he is as young as any of us and," his voice sank as he added, "his love for you is the talk of Arizona and he's as jealous as a Mexican."

"I know it," sobbed the woman.

"He'd take the life of a man if he thought he had even kissed your hand — that way."

"Yes, yes."

"Now, you can't beat that for a lover anywhere," said Denton more cheerfully as if it were all settled now. "And now, your parole. Promise me you'll never speak to this man again."

"Do you think I need to make such a promise?" answered the woman, dropping the curtains, turning and coming forward.

"Still," said Denton who was intensely practical, "your word."

"I give it," said the woman.

Indignation was beginning to add its fire to the scorching of grief, humiliation and disappointment.

"Your hand on that," said Denton as if she had been a man.

"Do you care to take it, Mr. Denton?" said Estrella.

"Of course," answered the young lieutenant as the two clasped hands heartily.

There was not time to break that clasp when

there came a sudden and dreadful interruption. From outside steps clattered on the porch. One of them, at least, sounded terribly familiar. Estrella Bonham stood petrified. A voice came to the two faintly.

"Orderly, fetch in my bag," were the words they heard.

There was no mistaking that deep, quick, authoritative tone.

"The Colonel!" whispered Estrella, turning ghastly pale.

She tore her hand away, ran to the door and noiselessly shot the bolt.

"Don't do that," said Denton.

But the woman paid no attention to him at all. She was mad with terror.

"Hide, hide, please," she whispered, coming back to him.

"Impossible," was the answer. "Why should I? There is nothing wrong."

"You're being here. At this hour! We can't explain it. As you said, he's as jealous as a Spaniard. Go into the window a moment behind the heavy curtains there. I'll take him away. Then you can go out."

"I can't do it," said the young man stubbornly.

"Don't you understand? It's of you he has

been jealous always, never of Captain Hodgman. We diverted suspicion that way. Go! Go!"

"It's madness," said Denton, his judgment telling him that even if the circumstances were suspicious he had nothing to fear.

A word or two of explanation would clear up everything. But the woman's words had enlightened him. He could not give that word of explanation without compromising her, and still he stood as reluctant as any other honourable man to hide without a cause. The next minute the door was tried, the knob turned, it gave a little under outside pressure, but the bolt held. The Colonel knocked upon it. The room was full of light and through the spaces beside the curtains, he saw that it was.

"Estrella!" he called.

Mrs. Bonham was beside herself with terror.

"Here, Colonel, coming," she answered and then turned to the Lieutenant. "Please give me a chance."

"Estrella!" came the voice of the Colonel a little louder and a little more peremptorily.

"Yes, dear, I'm coming," answered the woman with one last glance toward the Lieutenant who was in a state of fearful indecision.

He had to play the coward's part. He had to

do what his soul loathed. And for the safety of the woman. Estrella Bonham had made her plea, she could do no more. The door must be unlocked and her husband admitted. She shot one appealing glance at him and stepped toward the door. Denton could not resist. He turned instantly, stepped to the deep embrasure of the window, drew the heavy hangings across it, and feeling like a thief, a coward and a blackguard, he concealed himself and waited, cold sweat breaking out upon him not so much for fear of the consequences to him personally, but in the realisation of the situation itself.

Making a desperate effort for composure, Estrella opened the door. The Colonel came in, stepped toward her instantly and fixed his gaze upon her. Unfortunately, she had to stand in the full light. Her eyes were red with weeping, although she had attained a certain degree of forced calmness, that was an evidence of agitation which it was impossible to hide. Even a casual scrutiny would have noticed it, much more the keen glance of the Colonel who was accustomed to read the faces of men if not those of women. Something he had heard a few moments before had aroused all his jealous suspicion,

a suspicion which, reposing trust and confidence in the young man of his affection, he had successfully fought down and cast aside heretofore. Now, it had come to life again.

“What’s the matter?” he began as he came into the room and closed the door.

“I? Why, nothing much. I —” faltered his wife.

“You’ve been crying?”

“Yes, a little. I came in here and locked the door because I —” The poor woman was against the wall surely. She was talking at random and for time. “— because I didn’t want Bonita to see me. She’s been so happy to-night. She wasn’t in her room, was she, or ours?”

“I don’t know,” answered the Colonel briefly, his voice strangely stern.

“Let’s go there, then.”

“You were alone here, Estrella?” asked her husband, making no move to comply with her request.

“Why, yes — alone.”

It cut her to the heart to lie to him but she had to do it. She contrasted him instinctively with the sneaking Hodgman revealed in his true colours. She was playing a losing game she

realised and she was playing it desperately. The Colonel's question revealed to her how hopeless was the situation.

"Where's Denton?"

"Denton?" faltered his wife; what did he know, what did he suspect?

"Yes, Denton." His manner was not harsh but it was terribly intense and from that very fact, the more appalling to the woman. His speech was unusually slow and deliberate. "I met Captain Hodgman at the gate. He says he saw Denton come into the house."

Estrella Bonham could not speak. She bit her lip. She strove for words. They would not come. The best she could manage was a negative shake of the head.

"That's funny," said the Colonel.

He stared at his wife with growing suspicion.

"Well, let's go see if we can find him," said his wife desperately.

"I've been over the other rooms of this floor, and if he isn't in here or in the dining room or kitchen yonder, where could he—" He stopped. "It's impossible. I wouldn't like Harry to know that we had stood here doubting him this way for a moment. Not even on the

evidence of a thousand Hodgmans. And by heaven, I won't." He went over toward the dining-room door on the left, passing the large and heavily curtained window and stopped before the smaller window by the fireplace looking on the patio. "I don't like to search the dining-room and kitchen for a boy like that, still—" With his hand on the door leading into the other part of the quarters, he stopped. "Hodgman certainly saw somebody though. That last batch of recruits had one or two gay birds in it. Perhaps one of them. I guess I'd better—" But he did not follow out his purpose. He stepped to the window and looked out across the patio. "Hodgman's still there," he said slowly. "Perhaps I'd better call him in and—"

"Oh, my God!" faltered Estrella under her breath, because he was so close now to the larger window in the other wall that it did not seem possible he could avoid seeing the Lieutenant. It was an unfortunate ejaculation, for the Colonel heard it, or at least, he heard the sound of the words although he did not distinguish them, for he turned sharply and as he did so, he caught sight of Denton behind the hangings in the deep embrasure. Two steps took him to the alcove, he tore the curtain aside.

"What!" he exclaimed, staring at the white-faced, sweat-bedewed young man.

The Colonel recovered himself more quickly than the Lieutenant, although his heart turned to ashes and life lost all its sweetness and savour for the moment. But he was a soldier and a veteran.

"Mr. Denton," he began with outward calmness but with deep feeling.

Denton stepped forward feeling more humiliated than he ever had been or than he had supposed he ever could be in all his life. So intense was his mortification and shame that words of explanation rushed to his lips. Estrella Bonham could read his face without difficulty. Standing back of the Colonel, she clasped her hands and looked at him again. The same appeal that had put Denton in this terribly compromising position, served to keep him there. He stopped, drew himself up, saluted his superior and said nothing.

"Well, sir?" said the Colonel in the same steady way in spite of the wild thoughts rioting in his soul.

Denton racked his brains for something but nothing came. The best he could play for now was delay.

"I'd like until to-morrow to explain this to you, sir."

"Now," said the Colonel, his voice rising and breaking. Even he was unequal to the terrific strain under which he was labouring. "Now, and for God's sake be quick about it. Tell me at once, that I'm a trusting old fool betrayed as always by his dearest friend."

The Colonel stepped back so as to have Denton and his wife both in view.

"No, sir, no!" cried Denton.

"But the door was locked," went on the Colonel. "Although you were seen to come here, my wife said she was alone, you were hiding. What other meaning is there to these things?"

"No other," said Denton desperately.

"What!" exclaimed the Colonel.

"Mr. Denton," said Estrella.

"Only that — that —" said Denton, coming to a swift resolution to assume all the responsibility, little realising all that determination ultimately involved.

"What!" exclaimed the Colonel.

"Mr. Denton," whispered Estrella again.

"Only that, sir. Mrs. Bonham thought she was alone, of course."

"And you?"

"I was hiding — there."

"Why?"

"I heard Mrs. Bonham coming, I didn't wish her to see me and so I hid behind the curtains."

"Why hide?" asked the Colonel harshly.
"Why were you in this house?"

He was trying to fathom the meaning of this strange train of circumstances. An idea suddenly came to him.

"Not —" he looked from Estrella to the Lieutenant. "It can't be. There's another lady in this house under my care, a guest of the Eleventh, my wife's sister."

But this was too much for Denton. He stepped forward exclaiming fiercely,

"Colonel Bonham!"

"Well?" said the Colonel, but in a moment Denton recovered himself.

"You — you are also mistaken in that, sir," he said quietly.

"Then why here?" insisted the Colonel.

"I'll explain to-morrow," said Denton resolutely.

"You'll answer me now, or I shall place you under arrest," said the Colonel with growing indignation.

"To-morrow."

"Now!"

He waited. No answer came. He ran to the door, tore it open.

"Sergeant of the guard."

Denton stood as immovable as if he had been turned to stone. The Colonel's look appealed to him, his heart yearned to tell the old man everything, but with Estrella Bonham standing there he was compelled to silence. He was silent also while Kellar and the guard came in and came to a halt. He was silent still while the Colonel made a last appeal to him.

"Denton," said the Colonel, "will you answer me? In the name of the regiment don't force me to do this. Sergeant," he said finally as the other made no reply after a long pause, "escort Lieutenant Denton to his quarters and confine him there under guard. Take his sword."

Kellar, not relishing his job evidently, for Denton was a great favourite with him and all of the men, saluted the Colonel and turned to the Lieutenant. Denton unbuckled his belt and handed it and his sword to the Sergeant. As he did so his hand made a quick movement toward his breast where he had thrust the letter which he now intended to draw out. Denton knew he

could trust Kellar and if he could get it into Kellar's hands he would destroy it and the last possible evidence against Mrs. Bonham would have disappeared. His movement was very quick but the Colonel had not taken his eyes from the young man and he saw it.

"What's that?" he asked immediately.

"Nothing, sir," answered Denton, swallowing hard.

"Kellar."

"Yes, sir."

"Search him."

Denton shrank back as the Sergeant approached him. The old man looked at him kindly.

"I've got to do it, sir," he said.

He seized the young man and turned him about as if in the search. It was cleverly done and Denton found time to whisper.

"The letter — For God's sake!"

Kellar also had seen Denton's previous movement. He took the letter from the officer's pocket and risking degradation and punishment, concealed it in his own as he busied himself with the search.

"Well?" asked the Colonel impatiently.

Kellar had of course been forced to search thoroughly and his hands rummaging in Denton's

breast pocket touched the package concealed there and in utter ignorance of the contents, he drew it forth.

"Nothing but this, sir," he answered. "It's his pipe I think. No —" his face changed.

"What is it?" asked the Colonel.

"I don't know, sir," said the Sergeant, who realised soon enough what it was and who would have given his head if he had not found it.

"Open it," said the Colonel.

Kellar slowly opened the leather roll. One glance and the Colonel saw the sparkle of the light upon his wife's jewels. He stepped over to the roll, took it from the hand of the Sergeant, spread it out and looked at his wife. His back being turned, Denton lifted his finger swiftly to his lips and then dropped his hand. Estrella stared at the roll with astonishment. This was a new and terrible complication. Never had she loathed herself as at that moment. But she was playing for life, for future happiness. Her mad infatuation for Hodgman had gone, blown away by the wind of his treachery, by the exposure of his character, which Denton had brought about. The baseness of the man in wreaking this frightful revenge upon Denton without thought of what it would cost her only increased her loathing for

her former lover and in place of the mad passion which he had inspired, there sprang into life a burning flame of affection for her great and gallant husband. She had turned from him lightly. Now she was fighting desperately to get him back or to retain him and, womanlike, she forgot Denton's plight, she forgot everything. It was not the mere fact of exposure or the consequences to her, it was her husband's heart and affection she was fighting for now, and she played her part to the very end.

"Sergeant," said the Colonel, "take your men to the guardhouse again."

"Yes, sir," answered Kellar, saluting and retiring with the guard.

"Close the door," added the Colonel as the old man disappeared into the hall. "Estrella," he said to his wife, "these are yours, aren't they?"

"They are," faltered the woman and then with a momentary impulse to shield the man and confess she began faltering, "but I can —"

But Denton, having entered the game, was now resolved to play it to the end at whatever cost to himself.

"Mrs. Bonham," he said sharply.

"Lieutenant Denton," said the Colonel, turn-

ing to him, "how did you come in possession of these?"

The truth could not be told yet. Denton would not lie. He thought of no adequate reply.

"I decline to answer, sir," he said finally.

"Impossible. You must answer."

"I will not."

"Mr. Denton," said the Colonel, "you don't understand the seriousness of the situation. Your refusal will leave but one inference, and damme, that's impossible," he shouted. "Why should an officer of my regiment steal? Why should you—" he paused for a reply but none came. "Can't you speak? Denton, for God's sake —"

"I have nothing to say, sir," answered the Lieutenant.

"An officer of the Eleventh," said the Colonel half to himself. He put his hand to his brow. He had never looked so old in all his life, thought Denton, and he had never seemed so desirable before thought Estrella, watching. "And every one of them has been like a member of my own family," he faltered. "What is the matter? I start out for a journey. A messenger meets me with a telegram, calling it off. I turn right back and find — this." His glance wavered from the jewels in his hand to his wife, from his wife

to the young Lieutenant whom he had loved and trusted, to whom he had been a father. "I've been told to-night that you needed money — your poker losses. But why not come to me? Denton, you have either committed a theft or — or your presence here implies — dishonour — to me."

"No, no, not that, sir," cried Denton swiftly, again interposing to prevent Estrella from speaking; at least he hoped that she would have spoken although whether she would or not no one could have told.

"You are a thief, then."

It is impossible to describe the scorn and contempt and bitter sorrow and even anguish in the Colonel's words. The naked statement roused the woman.

"He is not a thief," she cried. "I am sure those wretched trinkets —" She waved Denton back. "I don't care —"

"I don't care either," cried the Colonel. "I'd give them all and a thousand times as much if I had them to know that this boy is innocent. Denton, I loved your father. My God, I can't try his boy on such a detestable charge. There must be some way out of it. You've been sullen and indifferent lately. That's it, you don't like

your duty. I'm afraid that the army is no longer the place for you."

Denton staggered back as if a bullet had struck him in the heart. To be turned out of the army, to leave the service, and upon compulsion! Verily, he had not counted the cost. But to do him justice, if it had all been set before him, he would have pursued the same course for the honour of the woman, for the happiness of the man. Denton had a sort of blind faith that things would come right between the Colonel and his wife if they were only given time, that the mad infatuation for Hodgman being dissipated, Estrella would begin to value her husband at his true worth and return some of the affection which he so generously lavished upon her. But to leave the army, to leave the service he loved!

"What do you mean, sir?" he asked appealingly.

"I mean," said the Colonel with his heart breaking, for he loved the boy, "the only way out of this is for you to resign."

"No, no, Frank! No, no!" cried Estrella, throwing herself on her husband's breast.

The Colonel's arm went around his wife. He drew her close to him. He thought she realised as he did what his decision meant to the young of-

ficer. Yet, it was certainly better to resign with honour than to be tried and convicted and degraded and dismissed and imprisoned for theft. The older man thought he was doing the younger man the greatest of kindnesses by the forbearance. He did not realise that the obligations were the other way. With his free hand, he pointed from Denton to the table.

“Your resignation,” he said; “write it out.”

CHAPTER X

Wherein Through the Caprice of Fortune the Scoundrel Goes Unwhipped of Justice

IN his life hitherto, Captain Hodgman had been favoured by fortune not merely beyond his merits — he had no merits to entitle him to any dispensations from the goddess of Good Luck — but beyond his wildest dream. When he went out of the Commanding Officer's quarters that eventful night with rage and disappointment and deadly fear in his heart, he saw absolutely no way of escape.

Estrella Bonham was a beautiful woman and sufficiently attractive to warrant any man falling in love with her and so far as the mean nature of Hodgman was capable, he was really passionately attached to her. But if Estrella Bonham had been a poor woman instead of possessing a cold half-million in her own right, a marriage settlement of which she had absolute control, Hodgman would not have looked at her. At least, not seriously. His was of the temperament that considered every woman lawful game. He was wide in his taste, too, since into his net he strove

to draw people as far apart in social rank as Lena, the Sergeant's daughter and Estrella, the Colonel's wife. Her money had first attracted him, afterward herself.

Hodgman's record in the army was none too good, as Denton had said. He got himself transferred to the Eleventh after having been in the service a long time. No very warm welcome had awaited him either. In fact, Colonel Bonham had been minded to keep him out if he could but Hodgman had appealed to him, he had confessed some things and had begged for a chance and the Colonel had given it to him, all of which made his attempted betrayal of his superior officer's confidence the more heinous.

Great authority has told us that a man may smile and smile and be a villain and it could be put just as well the other way. Hodgman was as black a scoundrel as ever wore a uniform but he was adroit, good looking and with a wonderful assurance. His manners, when he wanted, were irreproachable and he was the better villain in that he was intelligent and well read. He came from a good family and was by way of being a man of the world. He could look people straight in the eye too. He was a living example of the fallacy of the popular opinion that an inability to

look the world in the face is a sign of weakness, or the reverse. Sometimes the biggest liar, as sometimes the biggest coward, presents the most brazen face toward mankind.

Hodgman had nothing but his pay and what he could earn by his undoubted skill at cards. It was to him that Denton, in common with many young officers, had lost heavy sums at poker. Indeed, his fellow officers saw more clearly into his character than his Colonel. Between the Colonel and his subordinates there was always a certain amount of inevitable reserve. Hodgman was thoroughly unpopular in the regiment of which, by the way, he was the ranking captain, but a spirit of loyalty, mistaken though it might be, and an unwillingness to be a tale bearer had prevented any of the actions which were so reprehended by the officers from being brought to the Colonel's ears by them.

Naturally, Hodgman, being dependent upon his pay and his precarious earnings at cards and other games, had a keen eye for the main chance. If he had run away with the Colonel's wife two things would have happened. Instantly, he would have been dismissed from the army in disgrace, and eventually he would have had to encounter the Colonel's wrath. It did not need a

very deep insight into Colonel Bonham's character to see what form that wrath would take or what manifestation of it would be visited upon Hodgman. The man who was quickest on the draw with the steadiest hand and the surest aim would be the survivor of the inevitable battle of which the woman, as from primitive times, would be the prize. Hodgman was no coward. That, at least, could be said for him, but even he had long and earnestly studied over that certainty before he had fully committed himself. Had Mrs. Bonham been a shade less winsome and attractive, and more especially, had her property been less extensive and realisable, less entirely her own, prudence would have overcome his passion.

As it was, the very goodness inherent in the woman had helped to bring about her undoing, for she had not fallen easily to his hand. She had fought against his pursuit with all her power and her unwillingness had but stimulated his obstinacy and finally he had come within an ace of triumphing. He would have triumphed that very night but for Denton. If he had done so he would have had both the woman and the money, provided he could have staved off the Colonel's wrath. Now, by the interposition of Denton, he would have neither the woman nor the money,

and yet have to face all the consequences of his action without any possibility of gain.

Denton's courage and conduct and his frankness had opened Estrella Bonham's eyes. Her mad infatuation for Hodgman had died instantly. She had blinded herself to some things in the past which at the moment of illumination all rose before her, insistent and clamorous in their accusation. Hodgman knew that the game was up so far as Mrs. Bonham was concerned. As he went out into the moonlight and crossed the lonely parade, he believed also that it was up so far as the army was concerned. He wished fervently as he walked across the deserted plaza that he had had his revolver with him. He would have shot Denton dead, put a bullet into the woman and then would have blown out his own brains. There did not seem anything else left for him and he cursed himself for not having had the means at hand to wreak his vengeance on everybody there. He would have felt better if he could only have involved the man and the woman in his own ruin.

He could picture in his mind Denton revealing the whole story of his own career with all its shady sides to Estrella Bonham. He could imagine what those revelations would mean to

her. Like every scoundrel, he could not be sure what was known and he imagined the worst. If he had only been able to retain that packet of jewels he might have fled. He would have to go any way and Estrella Bonham's jewels were worth thousands of dollars. They would have carried him into some foreign land where he could have got a new start. But even those had been given up. Yet, as we have seen, the fact that he had been dispossessed of them had been his salvation and Denton's damnation.

He did not know exactly what to do but he was sufficiently mindful of the situation to realise that he did not have to come to a conclusion immediately. The Colonel had gone to Los Angeles and would not be back for a week. Hodgman was in command of the Post. He could send Denton off into the desert scouting for the whole time if he wanted to. Estrella would never tell, and no one else could, he thought.

His position gave him all the present advantage of the game. Whatever course he decided upon he would have plenty of time to plan and think over and make all necessary arrangements to pursue it. Perhaps, too, matters might not work out as badly as he thought. He believed that the

guilty secret was known only to Denton and Mrs. Bonham and himself. As the fire of his rage and resentment moderated a little, he began to see that Mrs. Bonham certainly could not, and that Denton probably would not, say anything about it. And yet he was man enough to know that sooner or later such things would leak out. Well, he would deal with that situation when it confronted him.

The fact that he had added two deadly enemies to the increasingly large list he had in the service, did not trouble him very much. If, for instance, Kellar ever learned of Hodgman's betrayal of Lena, that would be serious, for the Captain realised that the Sergeant would probably shoot him on the spot unless the iron discipline and the habit of subordination of forty years of service would hold him in restraint. He had no idea that Kellar and Lena both knew of his treachery to the Colonel, and that to Lena's bitter fire of hatred had been added this fresh flame. The doctor knew about his treatment of Lena Kellar, and Denton and other officers, too, perhaps. Hodgman realised that the only reason that any of them kept silent was because they all knew what the consequences of an exposure would be:

a frightful scandal in the army, a Sergeant after long and faithful service tried for murder, and the disgrace of a woman made public.

Of course, Hodgman and Kellar were not brought into contact at all, but Hodgman and Denton both being unmarried officers, and in the same troop, would be thrown together all the time. Denton would certainly refuse to have anything to do with Hodgman. The situation would be unpleasant and grow serious, explanations would eventually be asked and would have to be made.

The Captain was a resourceful man with some of the never-say-die spirit in him but he stood staring across the prairie in the blackest silence and uncertainty of his career. Plan after plan, scheme after scheme, went through his mind and he was so engrossed in his bitter thoughts that he did not notice the ambulance driving across the prairie until it was almost upon him. It was bright moonlight out and there was no mistaking the ambulance. It was the one in which the Colonel had gone away. The curtains were up and Hodgman was petrified to see the dark form of his commanding officer in the shadows cast by the top. His heart gave a leap of fear at the

approach of the man he had so grievously wronged in intent at least, if not in act.

Was the decision as to his conduct going to be forced upon him at that instant. For a moment, Hodgman fancied that some one had told the Colonel and that he had come back to wreak his vengeance then and there upon the traitor. But quick reflection showed him that was scarcely possible and the Colonel's greeting convinced him that no such an idea as that had brought about that officer's return.

"Why, Hodgman," said the Colonel, signalling the driver to pull up, "this is late for you to be out."

"Yes, sir," said Hodgman, saluting. "But being in command of the Post, I was naturally — er —" he was feeling for his words, "uneasy," he added. "And I thought I'd better take a look around."

Hodgman's faltering manner and speech rather aroused the attention of Bonham. From where the two officers conversed, they had a clear view of the Colonel's quarters. Flickers of light from the spaces between the shades and the windows indicated to Bonham that some one was still stirring in his house. Hodgman's manner was suspi-

cious. So adroit had been the manœuvres of the Captain that the Colonel had never connected him in any way with Estrella. With singular fatuity it was Denton, who, in spite of the Colonel's better judgment, was under not exactly suspicion, but observation.

The Colonel was a proud man. He realised that Estrella had not experienced, or, at least, exhibited for him that feeling he had a right to expect in a wife, and instead of trying to enkindle it he had withdrawn into himself, leaving her more or less alone and by a perfectly understandable bravado even throwing her more and more into the society of younger people of the Post. As always, some of the trouble was his own fault, and some of the consequences must lie at his own door.

Denton had disliked Hodgman, who happened to be his troop commander, from the first. He and others had seen, from various little evidences, the progress of an understanding between Estrella and Bonham and the Captain. A husband, be he never so watchful, always sees those things last anyway. With an honest desire to checkmate Hodgman, Denton often had interfered with the course of his love affair. He had thrown him-

self in the company of Mrs. Bonham whenever he could and had done it openly and above board as a matter of course, so that the Colonel was jealous of Denton and unsuspecting of Hodgman who did his wooing secretly, at least so far as the husband was concerned.

"It is the business of the officer-of-the-day," said the Colonel, "to look after the Post."

"Yes, of course," said Hodgman. "And Mr. Denton is the officer-of-the-day. He is a very reliable young man and — er —"

As he spoke there suddenly flashed into his mind a brilliant idea which would help him out of all his difficulty. If he could concentrate the Colonel's suspicion upon Denton, if he could in some way bring about the Colonel's instant return to his quarters so that he could catch Denton and Mrs. Bonham together alone at that hour of the night with the jewels either in Denton's hand or on the table between them, the Colonel would at once and perhaps with justice, accuse Denton of attempting to run away with his wife. And all the explanations on earth could not undeceive the Colonel.

If they accused Hodgman he would at once deny it and say that the accusation was for the pur-

pose of freeing themselves. And against such an accusation on their part would be the evidence that they were together and that Hodgman was where he was. Hodgman felt that he could bluff the thing through and if he could —

With diabolic cunning he embraced the idea and he played the Colonel as a cat a mouse. There was nothing in the relative abilities of the two men to warrant Hodgman successfully befooling Bonham had Bonham not been so blindly in love and so jealous of his wife and had not his suspicions already been aroused. But those facts gave Hodgman the advantage.

"By the way," said the Colonel as Hodgman stood silent before him, "where is the officer-of-the-day?"

"Really, sir," returned the Captain, "I think I would rather not say."

"Rather not say, sir," exclaimed the Colonel. "I leave you in command of the Post, I return unexpectedly, my orders being countermanded by a messenger from the telegraph station. I ask for the officer-of-the-day and you tell me you would rather not say where he is. That is a remarkable statement."

"Yes, sir," said Hodgman. "I know it is. Probably it is nothing but the fact is —"

"Where is Mr. Denton?" said the Colonel imperatively.

Hodgman looked significantly at the ambulance driver, the Colonel sprang down from the seat, the two walked away.

"Now, sir, will you tell me where the officer-of-the-day is by request or shall I issue a specific command?"

"I do not know where he is now," answered Hodgman.

"Well, why all this mystery then?" asked the Colonel.

"When I saw him last, sir, he was going into — Mrs. Bonham's quarters."

The Colonel by this time was so aroused that he did not notice the deliberate intent by which Hodgman substituted Mrs. Bonham for the Colonel in alluding to the house.

"Has he left there?" asked the Colonel, his face as white as death. "Has he — Good God!" He took Hodgman by the shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"He hasn't left the Post, sir. There isn't any place to go, unless toward the railroad and you have just come from that direction and I have had the parade under observation for the last —"

But the Colonel did not wait to hear more.

"Report to me in the morning, Captain Hodgman. Meanwhile say nothing to any one under any circumstances."

"Very good, sir," said Hodgman.

The Colonel darted from him, sprang into the ambulance and the four mules took him to his quarters on a gallop. That fortune against which Hodgman had written so many indictments had reversed its usual course and dealt him a winning hand. The game was his own. At any rate there was enough in his favour to warrant him in staying in the game and playing it out to the end. As a precaution, however, Hodgman went over to his quarters, got his service revolver, carefully reloaded and examined it to see if it was in instantly serviceable condition, strapped it about his waist and went out on the parade grounds to wait. An irresistible attraction drew him near the Post Commander's quarters and he stopped in view of the window.

If the two inside did confess and throw the blame on him and the Colonel did not give him any chance to deny it, Hodgman would shoot him and flee. He saw Kellar and the guard come and go, wondering what that meant. He remained in the shadow of some of the quarters, watching the Colonel's house until the door opened again. As

the beam of light began to widen in the entrance, Hodgman drew his revolver. Who was coming forth now and in what mood? He fully expected the Colonel and was petrified with astonishment to see Denton stagger out. As the door shut behind the Lieutenant, Hodgman heaved a great sigh of relief. If they had accused the Captain, Colonel Bonham would instantly have sought him out to have it out with him. Certainly there must have been some sort of an exposure and some sort of a result. He waited until Denton was abreast of him and then confronted him.

"You damned low-down dog," said the Lieutenant as the other came in sudden view in the moonlight.

Hodgman's gun was out. They were utterly alone on the parade ground, the sentries were far away. They could talk unheard and unobserved. Denton's words brought reassurance to Hodgman's heart, for the tone in which he spoke them was evidence that the young man had been hard hit in some way. Therefore Hodgman laughed.

"I've got the drop on you now, Denton," said the Captain. "Don't make a move toward your gun or I shall be compelled to put a bullet through you. I take it that you have been caught trying

to run away with the Colonel's wife and with her jewels too, I suppose," said the other drawlingly and somewhat surprised by Denton's start to see that he had hit the mark. "You had to explain your presence somehow I suppose and—" with a fresh inspiration, "confess to being a thief and so on to save the woman."

"You dog," frothed out Denton. "The one thing that makes me willing to send in my resignation is that I won't have to associate any longer with you."

"Oh," said Hodgman, "so the service is going to lose its most promising and gallant young Lieutenant. How kind of the Colonel! Now, if I had been he I would have had you up for court martial."

"You, who would run away with a poor foolish woman, could be counted upon not to act as the Colonel. He has broken me, but by God, he is a soldier and a gentleman whom you can not even recognise or see when he is pointed out to you. I don't know why I don't kill you on the spot."

"I know," said Hodgman.

"Why?" snapped out Denton.

"Because a term in state's prison, to say noth-

ing of the possibility of a hangman's noose, doesn't make a man an eligible suitor for Miss —"

"Don't you mention her name," said Denton, crowding close to the barrel of the pistol. "I have just got to the limit. I'll stand nothing more from you and if you pull that trigger it will be you who will be staring through the noose not I. I let the Colonel think what he pleased for the sake of the woman you pretended to love and whom you would have ruined, and she said nothing because she found out what a knave and coward you are and what a noble man her husband is, but if it came to murder, I think she would speak out. Stick your gun in your pocket. I am as safe from you as you are from me. I am going to leave the army. I've got to. There is no other way. And I want to tell you that if a whisper of this gets out, noose or no noose I'll settle with you. And I'll tell you another thing."

"Oh, you will?"

"I will. Kellar and Lena know what you tried to do. I'll silence them but in case of any trouble they are witnesses and Lena isn't any too well affected toward you as you know. This thing will right itself some day, I'll be reinstated or I'll win a commission, and you'll get your punishment,

don't fear. Your shady record is getting blacker and blacker. Some day Mrs. Bonham, having repented of her damn foolishness and having convinced her husband of her love, will tell him of her own accord and I'll be set right. Then you look out. Now, that's all I want from you. If you breathe one word about me, if you make one insinuation or one suggestion to the officers of this regiment, I'll make you pay for it whatever happens. Now I'm going. You can shoot me in the back if you want to. That's the kind of a cur you are, and as I am no longer an officer in the United States, there is nothing to prevent this."

Quick as a flash, Denton seized the pistol which the Captain had lowered, and with his right hand jerked the weapon from him, threw it across the parade and at the same instant, struck Hodgman viciously across the mouth, not lightly with the open hand as before, but a hard bruising blow with a clenched fist. He waited a second but Hodgman was no match for him in a rough and tumble encounter. Besides, to play that game would have been to play it Denton's way.

"I'll remember all you've done, Denton," he said bitterly, "your blocking my game, this blow,

everything. We'll have a settlement some day. My way, not yours."

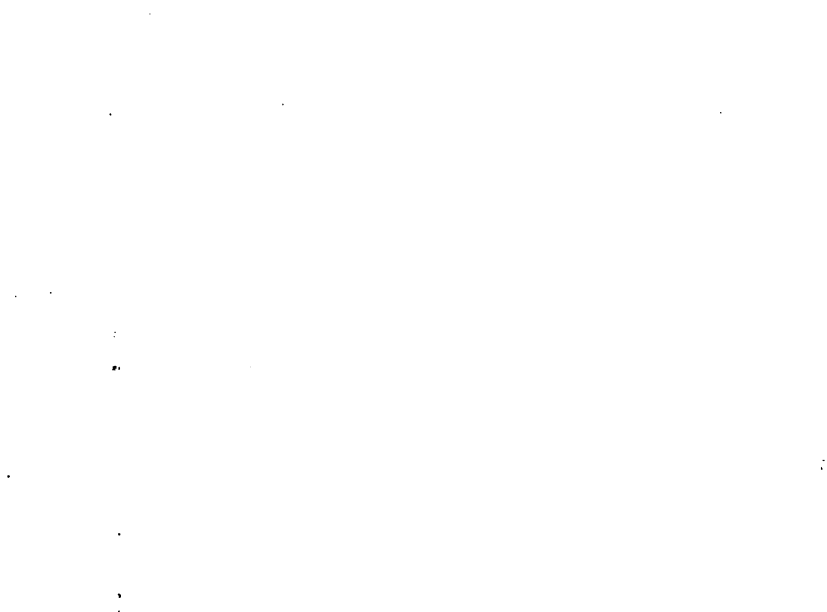
Denton turned on his heel and disappeared. In the personal encounter, as in that earlier in the night and in many others, Hodgman had come off second best but in the main issue he was ahead of the game. He could suffer even the blow and be thankful for the outcome when he thought of how narrow had been his escape and how hardly fate had dealt with Denton. Denton would not tell, Mrs. Bonham could not. He was safe for the present. Denton would undoubtedly leave the Post at once. Lena would go back to the Canby ranch, it was no business of Sergeant Kellar's. He was a close-mouthed old veteran. Denton and Mrs. Bonham would see that he did not talk, he had no personal interest in the matter. If it had been Lena now —

On the whole, Hodgman felt well pleased with himself. It was certain that the United States would be forced into war with Spain in the near future. Hodgman could get transferred to another regiment. He could probably get promotion. He was not without political interest. Maybe a lucky bullet would carry off the Colonel and — He was bitter enough at Denton but on

the whole was well satisfied as he went to his quarters that night.

He played his game with the Colonel the next morning, deploring the downfall of so young and promising an officer, and even had the assurance to extend his condolences to Estrella Bonham himself. He took pleasure in the fact that she had to be civil to him and respond with courtesy to his remarks in her husband's presence, although it was clear to him that she loathed the very ground he walked on. Hodgman was too experienced with women to make any attempt to get back in Estrella Bonham's good graces. That chapter of his life was closed.

BOOK III
WHEN ROUGH MEN RULE
THE WILD JUSTICE OF THE FRONTIER



CHAPTER XI

In Which Bonita Proves Herself a Successful Wooer of a Helpless Man

NATURE had blessed black-haired Tony Mostano with a sweet tenor voice. When this was added to his big black eyes, his curly hair, his regular features, his dashing behaviour, his caressing manner, Lena Kellar, who was his exact antithesis in nearly every particular, found him well-nigh irresistible. Lena was setting the table in the big dining room of the ranch house. Room was no object in Arizona, labour was cheap, adobe bricks could be had for the baking, the walls of the ranch house were of an amazing thickness. The sill of every window was a broad seat. In the big window looking out on the porch and thence giving a full view of the courtyard, or enclosure, where we have seen the Colonel and old Canby drinking mint juleps and discussing women, the young vaquero sat negligently asprawl in his lazy yet somehow fascinating way. He had a mandolin on his knee upon which he was picking a languorous accompaniment to the song that he warbled forth with many a languishing glance toward Lena.

The Spanish language was Greek to the little German girl but there was not much of the intent and purport of it that escaped her. She was so flustered by the situation that setting the table became a task. She put the knives and forks and dishes down in time to the music. In her way she was as musical as Tony and her heart beat an accompaniment to his words visible in her actions.

For the benefit of the Spanish-speaking readers this is what Tony sang,

*" Del cielo la estrella Brillante,
El viento que viene del mar,
Sabiendo tu perfidia te adora,
Porque lo llama locura?"*

But no printed words could convey to any one how Tony sang it, or with what effect.

The climax of the song appeared to be so good to Tony that he suddenly stopped and as usual the woman spoke.

" That's a pretty song," said Lena, clattering a cup and saucer down upon the cloth.

" You like that song? I make that song myself," said Tony in his delightful, broken English, as hard to express graphically as his love notes.

At least Lena thought it was delightful, as

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Tony thought Lena's Germanic rendition of English words was much more beautiful than the most correct and classic pronunciation.

"What does it mean?" asked the girl, who wanted to hear in the vernacular so far as Tony could master it, what her heart deduced.

"Major-Domo, he tell me Mexican words for that song of mine," said Tony proudly.

"Did he? Well, then, please sing it in American if you can," said Lena, stopping, all curious attention.

Thus adjured by his lady love, Tony resumed his mandolin and burst forth with the following free rendition for which Denton was also responsible.

"The heavenly star far above her,
The wind of the infinite sea,
Who know all her perfidy, love her,
Then why call it madness in me?"

The evident pleasure with which Lena listened and which she was too artless to conceal suddenly changed. The colour faded out of her cheeks. The frightened look which was so often seen in her eyes came back.

"Stop! Stop!" she cried suddenly, utterly spoiling Tony's final flourish and amatory glance.

"What is the matter?" asked the surprised young vaquero, who never anticipated any such effect from the rather free and pretty translation that the Major-Domo had made of his love ditty.

"You sang, 'Who know all her perfidy,'" said Lena darkly and recklessly it must be admitted. "Are you singing about me?"

"What is that perfidy?" asked Tony. "I know him not. In Spanish he means, 'she break my heart.'"

"Perfidy is — is —" But Lena could not explain it to Tony and she began to be very sorry that she had mentioned the subject at all. "It's terrible," she added lamely enough.

"Is cuss word, like go-damn?" asked Tony in all seriousness.

"No, no, Tony," answered the girl, recovering herself, "I am just foolish. It is nothing at all."

She sat down weakly enough at the table. Tony sat up as the girl sat down.

"Because," he continued calmly, "when it is cuss word, I make it," and then with a sudden fierceness which the situation did not seem to call for, he said passionately, "Go-damn, I love you."

Lena sat bolt upright at this.

"No, Tony!" she cried. "No, no!"

But Tony, having fired his charge, recoiled into

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his former languishing mood in spite of her somewhat agonized deprecation.

"Yes, yes," he said quite calmly.

"What right have I to be loved by anybody?" protested Lena, recognising that she had no right perhaps, but wishful to be persuaded that she had. But Tony did not answer her question. His own career bulked large with him.

"I go with soldiers. I fight with them, I help them. When I come back, you be my wife. Wife of Tony Mostano, best vaquero in all ze world."

"When do the soldiers go, Tony?" asked Lena apprehensively.

"Damn if I know," answered the vaquero calmly.

"Tony," said Lena reprovingly, "you mustn't swear so."

"Oh, well," said Tony, flashing his white teeth, "when I learn American, I learn good bad, together. Make no difference to me. I not tell. Listen." His fingers strayed to the mandolin again, he picked a few chords and then played, "Lieber Augustin" wooingly and with Spanish time.

The girl listened in a trance.

"Lena, your father is a Dutchman," he said after a time.

His words broke the spell. She rose to her feet and began to set the table.

"Yes. And that's a German tune."

"Yes, I like the German tune but I like my own song better," said Tony, shifting back to the melody of his ballad and speaking in a monotone which fitted well with the music.

"When I come back from the war, Lena, I build you a shack. Not one room, like vaquero shack, but two rooms with bench on east where shadow comes. We sit there, I play to you. My mandolin — and damn-to-hell-my-soul, I love you."

"Tony!" exclaimed Lena, shocked agreeably and disagreeably, in one instance by the confession and in the other by the language.

"You live with me in 'dobe shack?" said Tony, quite oblivious to anything wrong in his words. "You be my wife?"

"I couldn't, Tony, I couldn't," faltered Lena, face to face with the confession and proposal for which she had longed but which her past had made it impossible for her to accept.

"What you want?" cried Tony fiercely, sitting upright. "You want a Dutch fall-off-his-horse corporal? I should stay awake night, forever 'cause of that. No! No!"

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He slammed the mandolin down, but before Lena could answer or he could follow his impulse to come toward her where she stood by the table, the door opened. That was a danger signal for Tony. He swung his legs the other way, dropped to the porch, sprang down into the courtyard and disappeared. The newcomers were the mistress of the house and her youngest daughter. Mrs. Canby had eyes for everything and everybody. She saw Lena's perturbation and heard the vaquero's footsteps.

"Lena," she began, "who was that?"

"That was Tony, ma'am," answered Lena in great confusion.

"Well," said Mrs. Canby, "the cattle men don't belong in the court, Lena, let alone the windows of the house. You must tell them not to come beyond the stables. This is our side of the place. I wish they'd get their blamed troop of rough riders done and go."

"Ma doesn't mean by that," interrupted Bonita gently, "that if there is any one you particularly care to see, that he can't come over here when your work is done."

"There are none I care to have come," said Lena, heavily resuming her work just as Denton entered by the door from the back of the house.

But a few months had elapsed since Denton had sat down in the quarters of the Colonel at Fort Grant and had written out his resignation. The world slipped from beneath his feet that moment. He had thought in that agonizing hour that life held nothing more for him. The army had been his life dream. He had consecrated himself to it from his boyhood. To give it up seemed to him like parting with life itself.

The fact that he was no longer a soldier of the Republic still filled his cup with bitterness. When he thought of the manner of his going, the injustice to which circumstances had compelled him to submit, the blot on his fame, the bitterness was intensified. When it came to him, as it did whenever the subject was in his mind, that his fate was due to the devilishness of a blackguard, that the burden of it had been shifted from the back that should have borne it and loaded upon Denton's shoulders, he ground his teeth.

It was with difficulty that he had restrained himself from going out and killing Hodgman the next morning after his resignation had been announced and it had been accepted by telegraph from Washington without hesitation or urging, through the Colonel's influence. There were two reasons why he had not done so, Estrella and

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Bonita. And one of those reasons had enabled him to bear the hopeless situation. He had suffered all this for a woman, Bonita's sister. There was singular compensation in the fact that it was Bonita herself, who enabled him to endure it.

And Denton was young, he was confident that in some way the hideous wrong that had been done him would be righted. There would be time enough to punish Hodgman after the wrong was righted. If he took the law in his hands before that time his chances would be gone forever. In some way or other Hodgman must be made to right things himself, and Denton waited for that time.

Meanwhile, his present attire indicated what he had done. The dashing lieutenant was an equally dashing cowboy. If he had not been born on a horse, he had mounted one as soon as he could spread his legs far enough apart for the purpose. He had immediately gone over to the Canby ranch when his resignation had been accepted. He had entered Canby's service and — here he was, Major-Domo, Ranch Boss, right-hand man!

"What's all this noise and dust and excitement outside?" asked Mrs. Canby. "Is it a round-up?"

"No, not a herd of any kind," said Denton. "It's the regulars."

"The Eleventh?" exclaimed Bonita brightly.

"I think so," said Denton soberly. Naturally he did not much relish the approach of his old regiment, much as he longed to see the officers and men. "What's the matter with Tony?" he went on to change the conversation. "I met him in the patio muttering to himself and he looked mad enough to hit somebody over the head with his mandolin."

He was looking at Bonita as he spoke. He was always looking at Bonita for that matter when he was with her, and thinking of her when he wasn't. And he saw her glance meaningly at Lena.

"Oh!" He stopped. "What is it, Lena?" he asked mischievously.

"I don't know, sir," replied the poor girl in great confusion. "He was here playing his mandolin and —"

She stopped, the colour flaming into the usually pale cheeks, and then darted out of the door in her dismay.

"She might do worse than Tony," said Denton reflectively. "He wants to quit again and I'd rather almost lose most any man from the ranch

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or the company than Tony. If he'd marry and settle down we could keep him here."

"I'll see him myself," said Mrs. Canby decisively. "I promised Estrella I'd look after Lena and if Tony's in earnest she'll have to marry him. I'll go out and see if I can't find him now," she continued, stepping out on to the porch, her mania for arranging things matrimonial in full possession of her.

"You say the Eleventh is coming, Major-Domo?" asked Bonita.

"Yes, ordered to the Gulf, I believe," answered Denton.

"Then they won't need the volunteers down there in Cuba, will they?" asked Bonita curiously.

"Yes, Miss Bonita. The Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Mr. Roosevelt, is raising a regiment of rough riders and my company is going with him."

"But why do you go?" asked Bonita anxiously and tenderly. "Pa needs you here. He's getting to be an old man and he says you're the best Major-Domo the ranch ever had. He's so glad you resigned and came here. It isn't going to take the whole United States to settle Cuba, is it?"

"Miss Canby," replied Denton sadly, "I'm not a cattleman at heart. When I quitted the service, I wasn't needed. But with war in sight, and the President calling for men, a chap that's had his bread and butter and everything he knows in the world, given him by his country, can't hang back."

"But you're only one," said Bonita softly.

"Yes, but I'm the only one among these cow-boys with the knowledge that can help them. It's no use, Miss Bonita. The boys like me. They've elected me Captain of this company and I've got to go."

"But you may be killed if you go," said Bonita still more softly, her voice trembling at the thought in spite of her effort to control it.

Denton marked her agitation and rejoiced at it.

"And if I didn't go," said the young man, his own voice falling to her level, "I could never look you in the eyes again, and that would kill me. Don't turn away," as not daring to look at him she avoided his glance. "We may march to-morrow. If I stayed behind, wouldn't you, even you, despise me?"

He was very close to her as he spoke. For a moment Bonita looked him in the face.

"Go," she said, forcing her lips to frame the monosyllable.

He caught her hand and as she swayed faintly, he caught her waist.

"Bonita," he whispered, "does it make such difference to you whether I go or not?"

"Will you answer me one question truthfully?" asked the young woman, gently drawing herself away from him and looking him straight in the eyes now.

"Yes," said Denton simply, "anything you ask me."

"When you left the service," questioned the girl, "why did you come here?"

"Well," said Denton, "it was out of doors. It was in the saddle."

"Why didn't you go to Dunlap's or to Fraser's ranches rather than to ours?"

"Because — because —" said Denton.

"Truthfully," interposed Bonita.

"Well, because I wished to be near you."

"Why?" asked the girl.

Denton turned away. It seemed to him that with this stain upon his character, with this charge against him, with his forced resignation back of him, he had no right to say the words that trembled on his lips. If Bonita knew the circumstances of his departure she could not love him. He could not explain them to Bonita any more than

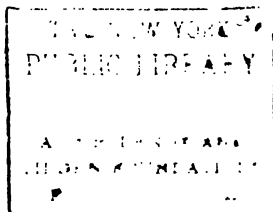
he could explain them to the Colonel. No inkling of these circumstances had got abroad, the Colonel had seen to that; but if he declared his love for a woman and asked her to be his wife, Denton would have to tell her something of it. To any other woman he could have confessed the whole thing, but to Bonita never, for the two sisters were passionately devoted to each other. It made his punishment doubly hard.

That he loved her, Bonita Canby had no manner of doubt. Old Canby was a very wealthy man. Mrs. Bonham and Bonita were his only heirs. No one knew into how much money they would eventually come, but it would be a great sum. A young lieutenant in the army was no match from a worldly point of view for Bonita Canby. And a young lieutenant who had been forced to resign under threat of public disgrace and who in his superior's eyes was nothing more than a common thief, who was now without any visible means of support except his pay as the head man of the Canby ranch, was even less a match for Bonita Canby.

The girl fancied that it was this disparity of fortune which had kept this man who loved her **and** — she admitted in her secret heart, whom she



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CAPPING THE CLIMAX.



loved — from confessing his love. She, therefore, made the advances that she did, although she would rather have died than make them otherwise; and now it seemed that her sacrifice had been of no avail. Her voice broke even as her heart was breaking and she had hard work to keep from bursting into tears — and Bonita was not given to tears. Joy and gaiety and lightness of heart were hers in full measure.

Denton stood dumbly before her. Grown desperate, she tried again.

"You had more courage in your uniform, didn't you?" asked the girl a little bitterly.

"I had more right then," said Denton.

"Do you mean," went on the girl, now determined to go through with the matter to the end whatever the cost, "that it was because you were not on my father's pay-roll?" she said with some of her father's bluntness.

"I mean, Miss Canby," said Denton, "now that I am here, that I should have been stronger than to have come. I should have ridden, as you said, to Fraser's or to Dunlap's, rather than here."

"At the Post," said Bonita dreamily as the recollection of that never-to-be-forgotten night — yes, it was a never-to-be-forgotten night to Denton

too, but for another reason — flashed through her mind, “at the Post, on the night of my dance, you know?”

“Yes,” said Denton.

“You told me that you would almost mutiny to be — with me,” continued the girl.

“Yes,” said Denton, looking down, not because he feared but because he could not meet her face and keep from telling her.

Never had she been so fascinating as in this strange, melting mood.

“When you first came,” continued Bonita, “I thought you had left the army because — because of me. Pa thought so, too. And then — then you never said anything and then when the old Major-Domo was killed at Wilcox, and Pa gave you his place, I thought maybe you’d be more like your own self because, on a ranch, a Major-Domo is like a Captain, and — But you still seem to avoid me.”

“Miss Canby,” said Denton hoarsely, putting out his hands as if to check her.

“And that hurts a girl’s pride,” said Bonita. “I wrote to Estrella about it —”

“About what?” said Denton in sudden anxiety.

“About all of it, about your silence, your avoid-

ance of your old comrades, your coolness to — me.”

“ You wrote to Mrs. Bonham ? ” asked Denton.

“ And Estrella answered — ”

“ What did she answer ? ”

“ That you were the bravest and most honourable man she ever knew ! ”

Denton turned away in a sudden revulsion of feeling. Bonita followed him.

“ I know I’m insistent and unwomanly, but I didn’t hunt you, Mr. Denton. You went out of your way to make me care for you; and now you can’t ride away to war,” with a sudden rush of words, “ and be silent. Even a girl has some rights.”

“ Why, God help me,” cried Denton, turning and catching her in his arms, “ I love you.”

And that was what Bonita had been waiting for. That was what she wanted. There was no resistance on her part. She sank into his arms with a sigh of thankfulness and joy and when he turned her face upwards, she did not withhold her sweet young lips from his.

Denton had been carried by assault. He had steeled himself against her palpable and powerful appeal. He had intended to say nothing until

such time as his character had been cleared. He had miscalculated his strength. Perhaps it would have stood him in good stead, however, if Bonita had not thrown maidenly reserve to the winds. Her mere presence wooed him, but when she deliberately went to work to make him speak, he was helpless. The garrison of the fortification of his heart put up a stout fight, but in the end it surrendered at discretion — perhaps it would be better to say, without discretion — and all the longing and love of the pent-up weeks rushed forth to meet her. Bonita was more than happy. The end, for her, had justified the means.

CHAPTER XII

*Which Treats of Such Important Matters as Love
and Business, to Say Nothing of Champagne*

"ALL right, Tony, I see 'em," said old Henry Canby in his deep booming voice outside in the courtyard. "Tell us who they are as soon as you can make 'em out," he continued, his heavy steps on the porch indicating his approach to the door, through which he presently entered the room.

The young lovers sprang apart instantly. Denton stumbled to one side of the room, Bonita sat demurely down by the table. Their separation was, indeed, a little too obvious, but Canby did not notice anything out of the common. His mind was filled with other things. He turned to Denton, who had stopped by the window, and pointed down the Valley.

"You see that dust out there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Soldiers, I guess."

"Sure to be, sir," answered Denton, turning from the window to the door and observing for

the first time that Mrs. Canby had followed her husband.

"On the move at last," said old Canby with deep satisfaction. "This means business. We're goin' to clean those Spaniards out o' Cuba in short order. Where's that bell?" he asked, meaning the call bell for Sam, the useful servitor.

"Here, Pa," answered Bonita, shoving the bell on the table toward him.

Canby picked it up and rang it vigorously.

"Like as not, Ma, the Colonel'll come back a general. Oh, Sam," he broke off as the meek celestial appeared in the doorway from the pantry. "I want you to hurry lunch. We'll ask the officers to eat with us, Ma."

"It's about all we can do for them in this God-forsaken country," said Mrs. Canby.

"Sam, get up stuff for about — How many officers do you suppose there'll be in that column, youngster?"

"There are only four troops going from Fort Grant. Say fifteen officers," answered Denton, who was not looking any too joyful at the prospect.

"Fifteen? Lunch?" queried Sam, cocking his head on one side.

"Yes, fifteen. And Sam, put a case of cham-

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pagne in a tub, an' chink it full of cracked ice."

"Yes, sa," answered Sam, grinning as he disappeared.

"I guess I'll go and change my dress," said Mrs. Canby importantly, "to make ready for them."

"Ma's been itchin' for a chance at one of them new dresses of her'n ever since she bought 'em," laughed the rancher.

He turned away to follow her when Denton interrupted him.

"Mr. Canby," he began solemnly.

"Major-Domo," answered the big rancher, gazing at the young man and seeing from the serious look in his face no less than the gravity of his voice, that he probably meant business of some kind.

"Have you ever thought, sir," began Denton, rather falteringly it must be admitted, "that anybody around the ranch might — er — get — er — interested in — er — your daughter?"

Canby stared at him very hard, very severely, in fact.

"Yes," he said after a long pause. "At times I have thought that."

"Ever thought that — that — I might?" Denton blurted out at last rather desperately, for it

was not any too easy for a penniless ranch boss to ask the largest ranch owner in Arizona for the hand of his only unmarried daughter.

Canby made no reply. He stood very straight and very stern, staring at the youngster. Suddenly his hand went to his hip pocket and mechanically Denton's hand went like lightning to his own holster. Motions like that were dangerous in Arizona in those days and it was always well to be prepared no matter who made them. Just such a thing as that had resulted in bloodshed before this many a time and Denton really did not know what was going to happen. Canby might so far resent such a proposal as to draw his weapon. The young man's move did not annoy Canby, however, for the big rancher deliberately drew from a hip pocket, not his gun, but his tobacco pouch! Denton, with a look of annoyance and a flush of shame at his suspicion, released his grip on his pistol. Meanwhile, Canby, without changing a muscle although he had noted everything with secret amusement, calmly took a big chew of tobacco. Next to a mint julep there was nothing as soothing to him as that.

"Yes, I have thought so," he answered slowly when he was good and ready and not before.

"Well," continued Denton much more freely

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now that the hard plunge had been made at last,
"I have."

"Oh, you have, have you?"

"Yes, sir," returned the young man promptly.

"Have you any objections, sir?"

The old man was non-committal still, he simply stared and chewed, waiting until it suited him to speak.

"I've been talking to her," continued Denton nervously; "I've told her that I love her, and she's been good enough to say that she loves me, sir."

Now during this whole discussion Bonita had sat helpless and in misery. She had had no idea how her father would take this proposition. He had, to be sure, made Denton a great favourite and had distinguished him with many marks of confidence; but whether he was prepared to go to the limit by giving the Major-Domo the hand of his youngest daughter was a thing which no one could foretell. Canby had been studiously oblivious to the presence of the girl. Her glance had wavered between her lover and her father, finally fixing itself on the latter in piteous entreaty. Her father had looked at her for a fleeting moment and she half rose as if to start toward him, but getting no encouragement she had subsided. He now picked up the bell, rang it, threw

away his tobacco, a sure sign of the importance of the occasion, for the rancher did not often throw away a chew of tobacco so soon as all that. While waiting for the summons to be answered, he rinsed his mouth out at the door, and when the Chinaman re-entered he at last deigned to speak but with tantalising deliberation. His words were indirect but illuminating to the young people who had watched him in silent misery and suspense.

"Sam," he said as the factotum entered, "bring a bottle of that champagne right away."

"Yes, sa," said Sam, smiling.

There was no mistaking the meaning of that. Bonita sprang to her feet and exclaiming, "Oh, Pa!" fell into his arms, arms that were opened to receive her.

Canby gave her a good, hearty, genuine hug and then gently but firmly removed her.

"Set down, kitten," he said. "Major-Domo."

"Yes, sir," said Denton, saluting in the old military way.

"I've lived here an' sold beef to Government an' Apaches for thirty years. Lots of 'em have tried to drive herds in here, an' steal a march on me. But whenever they reached the Posts or

the Agencies, Canby's cattle was usually ahead of 'em."

"Yes, sir," answered Denton, wondering what was toward but understanding joyfully that his love affair was progressing favourably and realising that he could afford to await the old man's pleasure.

"Nobody has made a move in this valley," went on the old rancher in the unusually deliberate manner he had thought fit to assume in this emergency, "twenty miles from peak to peak, an' two days in the saddle up an' down — that I wasn't on to."

"Yes, sir."

"So it's a pretty safe bet that I'd tumble to whatever was doing in this 'dobe corral, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir," said Denton for the fourth time, with a singular lack of originality.

The continued repetition of those two monosyllables rather got on Bonita's nerves. She wished her lover would find something else to say to her father, a thousand things occurred to her but she remained silent.

"Ah!" continued the rancher, spying the quart bottle of champagne and glasses on the tray which Sam at the moment brought in. "Open it, Sam.

And Mr. Denton, you've suited me from start to finish."

"Thank you, Mr. Canby," gratefully returned the ex-lieutenant, to his sweetheart's great relief changing the stereotyped form of his remarks.

"One year, I may make a hundred thousand dollars; the next year, I may be broke. Here, gimme the bottle, Sam. Set the glasses down there. You can go now. It all depends on the weather an' Congress," he continued. "Give us plenty of rain—" he carefully filled the glasses as he spoke. "Here's yours, Denton," he said, handing it to him. "God has charge of the rain — Here's yours, Bonita — Blast me, if I know whose department the tariff's in. Well, here's luck." He lifted his glass. "My boy," he added in his characteristic way, "up to this time you've been on a salary, now —" He paused while Denton and Bonita stood with anxiety in their hearts. "Now," he said, "you're half owner."

"Mr. Canby!" exclaimed the young man.

"I've jest been waitin' for you and Bonita to git together. Now you can pitch in and take hold of the ranch in earnest seein' that it belongs to you, too."

"I can't stay here, sir," said Denton sadly, setting down his glass.

"What!" roared Canby, putting his arm about Bonita. "She's told you she loves you, an' you're goin' jest the same?"

"I must," said Denton.

"You don't understand, boy. The other girl, Estrella, brought a cool half million to Colonel Bonham when she got married, an' this little one ain't goin' to git any the worst of it, you can bet."

"It isn't the money," said Denton. "My old messmates at the Academy are going to the front with their lives in their hands. It may seem rather silly to you, but the flag to which I was taught to take off my hat, that's going too. I couldn't stay back."

"And damme," roared Canby, "if I had twenty years off my old shoulders, I'd go myself. How is it, kitten? Do we send him?"

"Yes," faltered Bonita, burying her face in her father's shoulder.

"Bully! Go and get your finery on."

"Finery, sir?"

"Your old First Lieutenant shoulder-straps. I cut 'em from your jacket and she sewed on an extra bar of braid. There it is now," he con-

tinued as Bonita took down a khaki jacket from the wall. "Now, brand him a Captain of Arizona Volunteers. An' when you've cleaned the Spaniards out of Cuba come back to us. Don't stand there starin'. Bonita, you help him put it on. Let's see how it looks. Fine," he continued, as Denton slipped the uniform jacket on once more. "You might have been with these Reg'lars, but you're goin' the next best thing — an' you go heeled. Yes, sir, you go half owner of the fattest ranch in Arizona," continued the rancher. "We'll have another drink on that." He filled up the glasses again. "Now, lad, come back a colonel if you can. I say that for Bonita, for as far as she's concerned, there's only one sand-storm ahead of you."

"What's that, sir?"

The old man looked around very carefully and lowered his voice.

"Mrs. Canby," he answered fearsomely.

"Bonita's mother?"

"Yep. Ma don't care a heap about leather, 'chaps' don't appeal to her, but she loves gold braid. There's hardly anything in the world she won't trade even for a string of soldier buttons."

"H'm," said Denton moodily.

"She fixed up Estrella's match with the Colonel, whether or not. That wasn't my way of doin' business an' now — well, they ain't much more than speaking to each other."

"Too bad," said Denton. "I thought them most devoted."

He wondered if his sacrifice had been useless after all.

"They were, I guess," answered the other gloomily. "The trouble, whatever it is, must have arose since you've been here."

"Gove'nor! Gove'nor!" cried Tony through the window.

"Well," said Canby.

"Soldiers in plain sight now. The Colonel's with them."

"Colonel Bonham!" exclaimed Canby.

"And hees wife, too."

"Is Estrella going to —" began Bonita.

"Well, let's meet 'em, kitten, an' see. Come on," interrupted the rancher, turning to the door in pursuance of his purpose.

Bonita ran after him and then seemed to think the interview was not quite complete, for she stopped in the doorway.

"Will you go, too, Harry?" she asked.

Denton shook his head gloomily.

"You ought to. Pa has given you half of the business — and me. You are the biggest man in the Aravaipa Valley now for all the soldiers yonder," urged the girl with delightful archness.

Denton approached her swiftly. He seized her in his arms like a lord and master and she was more than willing.

"He gave me all the world when he gave me you, and having you I'm the biggest man anywhere," he cried, kissing her passionately.

That was the kind of answer Bonita wanted. Satisfied now, for the time at least, she ran gaily after her father, leaving Denton alone.

"The Colonel and his wife estranged," he said to himself. "Hardly worth my silence and disgrace," he muttered. Then he threw up his head, his face radiant. "But this is worth it. Bonita, love, freedom, action, the wide horizon."

He said nothing about the half interest in the ranch and to be honest, he thought nothing about it. It was the re-entering Sam who broke the spell with a question.

"May' Dlomv. Boss say fifteen — fifty?"

"Fifteen, lunch for fifteen."

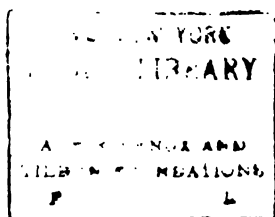
"Velly good," returned the Chinaman, preparing to remove the glasses.



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NOT SO FAST."

From Douglas Fairbanks—Aircraft Picture



He cocked his head up suddenly and listened to the sound of a distant bugle.

"Left into line. Conley's bugle," said Denton half aloud, his eyes shining. "Not another trumpeter like him in the service. By Jove!"

Sam had watched him keenly.

"You likee sodga tlumpet, May' Dlomby?"

"Like it, Sam," answered Denton. "That's a soldier's cocktail. There's another call, that's to dismount."

"You sabe what he say, eh?" asked Sam curiously.

"Yes, and that one is the water call."

Flushed with the excitement of it, he looked handsomer than ever to Bonita entering with Estrella. He was hers now and she could afford to turn him over to her sister for a little while. She smiled at him, waved him with a most proprietary air toward Mrs. Bonham, and went over to the Chinaman, leaving Estrella and Denton together.

"Sam, I want to help you with luncheon," she said at once engrossed in her task.

Meanwhile Estrella Bonham came straight to Denton and spoke to him in a low tense voice. It was the first time she had seen him since that awful night.

"I'll never forget your awful sacrifice for me.

Night and morning I have prayed for you," she said to him.

"Thank you," said Denton, a curious mixture of feeling in his soul, a deep resentment as ever when that appalling sacrifice was recalled, and a great pity for the poor woman whose unhappiness was quite evident in her face.

"Yes, and I want to say another thing to you. I've kept my parole — not to — about — you understand?"

"Yes, I'm glad. I knew you would."

She gave him her hand gratefully. He bowed low over it and then Bonita approached the two.

"How do you think he looks, Estrella?" asked the young girl of her sister, who had not yet divined the new relationship between the two, so engrossed had she been in her own affairs.

"Well and happy — I hope you are happy, Mr. Denton?" she asked anxiously, her conscience always smiting her for her willingness to accept his sacrifice.

"I'm the happiest man in the world," cried Denton, forgetting everything else and catching at Bonita who darted away from him with a merry laugh.

"Oh!" exclaimed Estrella, realising at once what he meant. "I am so glad," she said, a look

of thankfulness and relief on her haggard face, for this would be some compensation to him for all he had lost.

"I really couldn't, Canby," said Colonel Bonham, following his host through the door. "I ought —"

He stopped short as he saw Denton for the first time, and then without a word of greeting he turned away with darkening face. Canby stared at him in surprise.

"Got a little of the military here ourselves, Colonel Bonham," he said pointedly at last. "Mr. Denton, my Major-Domo, and Captain of the First Company of Arizona Volunteers — Rough Riders."

The Colonel's frown did not change. He acknowledged the introduction with the utmost reserve and the slightest of bows.

"Captain Denton," he said coldly.

"Colonel Bonham," returned Denton in exactly the same way, while the amazed Canby stared harder than ever.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked at last.

"You gentlemen must want to talk together undisturbed," said Denton, avoiding any answer.

"Excuse me."

He turned abruptly and went out without another word.

"I don't understand," said the rancher with increasing bewilderment. "I thought you two were the best of friends and —"

Colonel Bonham escaped the painful necessity of explanation just then because of the sudden appearance of Lena, who carried a tray full of dishes which she set down on the table.

"Why, Lena, how do you do?" began Estrella, glad for the interruption.

She had naturally been on tenter hooks during the brief colloquy and the little passage at arms while her husband and her protector were confronting each other, which had left her all atremble.

"Oh, Mrs. Bonham, I am so glad to see you," said Lena, taking Estrella's hand and kissing it affectionately in her queer foreign way.

"Nonsense!" said Estrella.

"Here, what's this for, Lena?" asked the Colonel, looking at the heap of dishes on the table.

"For the Colonel's luncheon, sir, and the officers."

"But we can't stop," asserted Bonham decisively. "Thank you just the same."

"Why not?" asked Canby.

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"Because this is simply a halt to water, and tighten cinches. Our cars are on the side-track now. Wouldn't mind a bottle of beer."

"Got some champagne on ice, an'—"

"Beer," said the Colonel firmly but smilingly.

"Beer it is," answered the rancher resignedly, nodding to Bonita who left instantly to bring the desired bottle.

"And I am to stay here, Pa, with you and Mother and Bonita," began Estrella nervously.

"Of course, of course. I'll send some champagne out to the officers, Colonel," continued Canby as Bonita brought in a cold bottle of beer.

"Coffee will be better for them," remarked the Colonel rather grimly as he took the bottle and, disdaining the glass on the table, drank it off. "Ah, that's good!" remarked the soldier, finishing it just as Mrs. Canby entered the room and opened her arms to her oldest daughter.

Her dress was fearfully and wonderfully made out of material no less surprising. Such a colour combination rivalled the most gorgeous Arizona sunset and the stars in the heavens did not sparkle more brilliantly than the jewels she sported. But no matter what she wore this was her mother and Estrella hugged her joyfully.

"I'll send the officers the coffee, Colonel," said

his wife briefly when she had embraced her capacious mother.

"No, that'll be my job," said Mrs. Canby promptly.

"I'd rather, Mother," persisted Estrella. "I'm home now for awhile and I might just as well get used to it," she continued, going into the pantry to give directions just as Doctor Fenlon and Miss MacCullagh entered the room together.

"How are you, how are you?" cried Canby, genially welcoming the two who were so often together; Mrs. Canby seconding him with a dignity begot by and in accord with her amazing raiment.

"You're going to stay with us, too, Miss MacCullagh, aren't you, while the regiment is away?" she asked hospitably if severely.

"No," answered the little school teacher, proudly exhibiting a brand new red cross on her sleeve.

"Quit school teaching, eh?" asked Canby.

"Yes, for good."

"Colonel," began the Doctor, looking somewhat askant at his charming companion.

"Doctor Fenlon," interposed Miss MacCullagh as the Doctor made the usual hitch at his

trousers, "if you don't like suspenders why don't you wear a belt?"

But the Doctor paid no attention to such trivial matters. He had more serious business at hand.

"What is it, Doctor?" asked the Colonel, smiling at the two and making a shrewd guess at the question that was coming.

"That two-story house, next to Captain Cochran's at the Post — you know?"

"Yes," said the Colonel, "what of it?"

"The custom's been to assign those 'dobe quarters to the married men," went on the Doctor.

"There are three bachelors in there now."

"Any married men in the regiment not provided for?"

"No, not now," said the Doctor, shaking his head. "But I was wondering what your policy would be if another married man should — ah — turn up when we come back."

He glanced meaningly at Miss MacCullagh; the Colonel followed his glance.

"Why, oust the boys, of course," he said simply.

"Colonel," began the Doctor again.

"Well, what is it, now?"

"You're a member of the Officers' Club?"

"Rather," said the Colonel.

"He's the president, Miss MacCullagh."

"I know that, of course," said Miss MacCullagh contemptuously.

"Well," continued the Doctor, turning once more to his Colonel, "whenever there's a little game of draw, you usually take chips?"

"Yes."

"I believe we play pretty much the same kind of a game?"

"I guess so."

"Don't hold 'em too close, and on the other hand, don't bet on every dinky ten-spot."

The Colonel nodded.

"And in the long run, what's been your losses?"

"I think I'm a little ahead of the game," said the Colonel after a moment of reflection.

"There!" said the Doctor, turning to Miss MacCullagh, "me, too."

"What's he talking about?" asked Canby.

The Doctor nodded toward the bewildered Canby.

"She hates it," he said.

"Do you mean poker?" asked the school mistress.

"Yes," replied the Doctor.

"I do," said Miss MacCullagh emphatically.

"Do you see what I'm driving at?" asked the Doctor again.

"Not quite," said the Colonel.

"It's really the only game I care for. So there's your explanation, Miss MacCullagh," he went on, turning to the young lady.

"What explanation? I can't see it," she asked.

"This is the third time she's declared her intention of quitting school, always in my hearing, and she's constantly displayed an interest in my wearing apparel, that nothing short of—"

He stopped dead.

"Short of what?" asked Miss MacCullagh, rushing to her doom.

"Of matrimony," said the Doctor, "can make legitimate."

"Why, you horrible creature!" exclaimed the school teacher, blushing vividly.

"But if I can't draw and fill occasionally, what's love even in a two-story 'dobe to me?"

The Colonel laughed.

"So that explains my silence," added Fenlon to Miss MacCullagh in a tone of absolute finality.

"Which is infinitely easier to explain than your speech," retorted the school mistress as she disappeared out on the porch.

"That's my method," said the Doctor, winking at the others. "Gets 'em waked up. Next time I'll ask her directly to be my wife. Couldn't have a better one. She was born for a hospital."

CHAPTER XIII

Wherein Captain Hodgman Flirts With Death, Unwittingly, Through the Medium of the Half Truth

INTO the room, coolly enough considering all that might be expected to happen, entered the dust-covered Hodgman. The Lieutenant-Colonel was on detached service and the Major of the regiment was with the other battalion, so that Hodgman was the ranking officer of the battalion under the Colonel's immediate command, as he had been all the year at Fort Grant. Upon him therefore had devolved the duty of getting the men back in ranks ready to take up the march after the halt and brief rest. He was very glad that they were not to make any extended stay at the Canby ranch. He knew, of course, that Denton was there and while he had in no way abated his purpose of revenge, he was not ready for any further encounter yet nor did he particularly desire to see Denton again at that time.

His rank, whether Denton realised it or not, had been of some protection to him in the service, but now that Denton was out of it — for Hodg-

man, quite unlike the wiser and better class of regular army officers, disdained the volunteer soldiers — Denton might do anything. Still, whatever else he was, the villain was no coward and, as there was no help for it, and he had to report to the Colonel and receive his orders, he came in himself, boldly enough. He might, perhaps, have strained a point and have sent another officer with a message but it was with a little spirit of bravado that he refrained from doing so. He believed that he would be safe and he wanted the enjoyment of seeing everybody else angered, unhappy, yet impotent in his presence.

His very existence had made life a worse hell than she had dreamed possible to Estrella Bonham during those wretched months at the Post. Hodgman with cool and devilish calculation had made many opportunities to speak to her in public when she had to meet him with outward civility, though he was most careful never to address her or even approach her when she was alone. He realised fully what she might have said to him in that event. Poor Estrella had paid severely for her moments of madness.

Hodgman came in briskly, with his head up, a little paler than usual perhaps. He stopped, saluted and informed the Colonel that the men

would be ready in the prescribed fifteen minutes.

"Good," exclaimed the Colonel, acknowledging the salute. "Governor."

He turned to the old rancher, slipped his hand in the other's arm and the two men wandered slowly over to the door. Mrs. Canby meanwhile welcomed the Captain with unwonted cordiality. Perhaps in her secret heart she was so glad that he was going away that she was more pronounced in that welcome than circumstances warranted, although, of course, she knew nothing at all about what had happened.

"I'm sorry there's got to be war," she said vaguely, "but it's good to see you again, Captain, even if it is only for a moment."

"Thank you, Mrs. Canby," said Hodgman, shaking hands with her and then turning to Bonita Canby who came slowly forward.

Bonita did not like Hodgman, just why she could not say. Denton had never mentioned his name and any casual references to him that she had ever made had invariably been received in dead silence. Denton could not trust himself to speak of him. She had some strange suspicions, however, and as she was a direct-acting, quick-thinking young girl, she marched straight up to Hodgman. Although she did not much wish to,

she shook his proffered hand and then she opened fire upon him without preliminaries.

"Does the army miss Mr. Denton very much, Captain Hodgman?" she asked directly and without attempting to disguise her interest in his reply.

At this moment, the Colonel, after shaking hands with the big rancher, went out of the door to see for himself the state of his command. Mr. Canby turned and came down toward the other two. He heard Bonita's question and he stopped where he was, listening. Hodgman's cue was to have answered the question briefly and truthfully, and to have gone off. He could have said with entire accuracy that the regiment, or the army as Miss Bonita put it, meaning that portion of it with which she was best acquainted, did miss Mr. Denton very much indeed. And on the pretence of duty he could then have saluted, made his apologies and withdrawn. But his evil genius was prompting him. It always was for that matter. He could not resist the temptation.

Hodgman's malicious devilry had brought about Denton's forced withdrawal from the army. If he could in any way start some rumour which would finally result in depriving Denton of Miss Canby's hand, for which he had no doubt the for-

mer lieutenant had been a suitor, his revenge would be delightfully complete.

And when this end had been achieved it would be easy enough to let Denton know who had been back of it all. Indeed, Hodgman would rather promote that kind of revenge than the more direct and simple kind of a braver and franker man, if a frank and brave man could entertain such ideas of revenge at all.

He laughed, therefore, and threw into his laugh all the unpleasant meaning he could infuse. Hodgman was an excellent actor, none better, and when his acting took the direction of exhibiting his meanness, it was superlative.

"Does the army miss Denton?" he repeated as his laughter stopped in a sneer. "Oh, well, not particularly, Miss Bonita. Of course, the army's conscious that he has gone and it is — er — rather —" he stopped, looked her squarely in the eyes. It was a faculty he enjoyed — "glad," he added emphatically.

"Glad!" exclaimed the girl, her face flushing.

She made a step forward as if she would resent the statement.

"Pardon," said Hodgman quickly. He bowed profoundly as he spoke, but not too profoundly to cover the sneer which served to introduce his next

words. "I forgot that Denton was something of a favourite with you, Miss Bonita."

Mrs. Canby, who had also listened, as the saying is, with all her ears, fairly bristled at this surprising statement.

"Not at all, not at all," she said hastily, referring to Bonita and Denton and then, "But why is the army glad he's gone?"

"Oh, he's a rather dangerous man to have around, you know, Mrs. Canby," answered Hodgman evasively.

Just here the old man interposed. His suspicions had not been particularly aroused by Hodgman's words. He was off on the wrong track, it was evident. Dangerous to him, meant but one thing.

"Quick on the trigger, eh?" he said complacently. "Well, that's a good quality around here."

"No, no," interrupted the Captain. "Denton's specialty was not guns but — er — the ladies."

"Get out!" said old Canby incredulously his anger beginning to rise.

"I don't believe you," exclaimed Bonita with ever growing indignation and utterly oblivious to her mother's warning call of her name.

"Sorry to brush Miss Canby the wrong way," said Hodgman with a great assumption of dignity and a sudden seriousness, "but —"

"But about Denton," said the old man.

Hodgman looked about quickly. Denton was nowhere to be seen. Mrs. Bonham and Lena were also invisible. Nevertheless, he took the precaution to lower his voice as he added,

"That was why he had to resign."

Mrs. Canby stared at him in blank amazement and then she turned and looked at her husband. That gentleman instantly responded.

"Why had to? How?" he asked of the Captain, advancing a step toward him.

He never had liked Hodgman, he liked him less than ever now.

"Excuse gossip, please," the officer answered, laughing again, "but since Miss Bonita seems to question my veracity I — Well the long and the short of the story is that an officer coming home unexpectedly late one night, found his young wife with — another man."

"Yes," said Bonita as Hodgman paused meaningly.

"That man was Denton."

Of all the deceptions that have been, or are,

practised by men, the half truth is the hardest to combat. Hodgman's words were absolutely accurate. An officer had come home unexpectedly, he had found his wife with another man, although the other man had not accounted for his presence, by failing to defend himself against the accusation that he was a thief instead of a lover. But aside from that there was not an atom of real truth in the whole statement. In spite of the fact that he had so cleverly twisted facts and had so boldly stated his conclusion, it did not ring true in the ears of one if not two of his hearers at least.

"That's a falsehood, a cowardly falsehood!" said Bonita Canby aflame to defend her lover from such a charge, and as the portly form of the Doctor came through the door where he had been long enough to have heard Hodgman's foul charge, she at once appealed to him and the Doctor answered promptly to her great satisfaction.

"First I've heard of it, Miss Bonita," he said most emphatically.

As a matter of fact Denton's resignation had been managed very quietly. Naturally Denton had said nothing about it, neither had the Colonel and Hodgman's lips had been sealed. It had been a mystery but there had not been the slightest inkling of the cause of it anywhere. This was indeed

the first time that Hodgman had ever dared to refer to it — and he was soon to learn what a terrible mistake he had made. The temptation to do the man a wrong was so great that he could not resist it. Old Canby assumed charge of the discussion at this juncture.

“ You understand, Captain Hodgman,” he said severely, “ that Denton’s my manager here on the ranch.”

“ Here? ” exclaimed Hodgman, looking about him quickly and in some alarm.

It was easy enough to make the charge in Denton’s absence. Bonita, who had eyed him sharply, noticed the Captain’s discomfiture.

“ I told you it wasn’t so,” she began triumphantly. “ He would not dare to say this to his face.”

“ Is Denton on the place now? ” asked the Doctor.

“ Yes,” answered Canby. “ He is somewheres about.”

“ H’m,” said the Doctor.

He turned abruptly on his heel and went hastily out. This was a case in which Denton had a right to be informed of what had been said and the Doctor intended that he should know. Hodgman, unfortunately for him, did not notice the

Doctor's departure, for Mrs. Canby had engaged his attention.

"Who was the woman? Was it that Mrs. Cochran?" she asked, mentioning the rather gay young wife of another officer.

"Pardon, Mrs. Canby, but I can mention no names," said the Captain with a great show of courteous reserve.

He started to leave. There was no object in staying further. He could not add to the mischief he had done. The poison had been injected, it could be trusted to do its work without any assistance from him. He began to realise that he'd better get away without any further delay. He bowed to the eager old woman, to the indignant but heart-broken young woman, and then turned to the door. But he had overlooked Canby. He had a settlement to make with him it seemed.

"But the fact?" said the old man sternly.

"The fact," said Hodgman defiantly, "I know."

As he spoke Estrella and Sam came out of the house with a big coffee pot.

"Now, take that to the officers, Sam," began the Colonel's wife.

"Coffee?" asked Hodgman lightly, seizing the

excuse and bowing in the coolest manner to Estrella who made no effort at all to acknowledge his salute. "I'll show you where to go, Sam. Come with me."

As he stalked out of the door, Bonita sat down at the table, buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Canby stared at his daughter gloomily and yet with a touch of pity. Mrs. Canby frowned contemptuously. To tell the truth, the rancher was dazed at the charge. Estrella, of course, had heard nothing of the conversation, yet she was not surprised to see her sister in tears and she naturally associated that grief with the Captain. She had never ceased to reproach herself that she had allowed herself to decline for one moment to such a man when she had the love of her distinguished husband. Naturally, she was the first to recover herself.

"Why, dear little sister," she said, putting her arm comfortingly and protectingly around Bonita, "what is it?"

"It all comes of Canby's havin' a common cow-puncher eat with us," answered Mrs. Canby in great dudgeon.

"A Major-Domo ain't a common cow-puncher," resented Canby.

"Mr. Denton?" exclaimed Estrella. "Are you speaking of him?"

"Yes," answered her mother. "Bonita thinks she's in love with him, and you know how stubborn a puppy love can be."

"Well, Mother," said Canby severely, "I don't call it puppy love."

Bonita looked up at her father gratefully. She was one of the few women who could look pretty through tears, too.

"If to love once," she said low and firmly and briefly, "and for always, is 'puppy love,' then my love is that. He is the first man I have ever cared for — and I am the first woman he has loved," she added defiantly, burying her face once more in Estrella's gown.

"A soldier's sweetheart mustn't cry," said her elder sister, patting her.

Mrs. Canby was strangely resentful of the whole proceeding. She ought to be the one on whose shoulder Bonita laid her head, she should be the one to comfort her daughter, and she could not quite understand how Estrella came to be filling that rôle while she stood without and perhaps her resentment made her the more severe.

"We understand," she said, "that there were

some didos down at the Post, that Denton had to resign on account of."

This was more than Estrella could stand. A thousand times a day her conscience smote her at the thought of the sacrifice in which she had involved an utterly innocent man that she might preserve her good name, repair her frightful blunder, and retain the affection of her husband, which she had come to prize so highly. She had been on the point of telling her husband a thousand times what had happened. There had been a change in his relation to her — or a change in his manner — there could be no change in his heart. The more he thought of it, the less satisfied he had become with the situation. He had never discussed it with any one. Of course, he could not. He did not like Hodgman and he had liked Denton. By rights, Hodgman should have been the villain and Denton the true man in the Colonel's mind. He had been on the point of asking Estrella for an explanation many, many times. If the truth be told, he did not dare to ask and the relations between them grew more and more strained. Estrella could not permit such a charge to be brought to her sister whatever happened. Perhaps she could explain, could

clear up matters without compromising herself. She would try. She certainly owed that much to Denton, to say nothing of Bonita.

"Mr. Denton's resignation was a mistake," she said firmly. "He committed absolutely no wrong. He is an upright, innocent man."

Bonita rose to her feet and clasped her sister in her arms.

"And you just love him, darling," said Mrs. Bonham to the young girl, "all you know how. He is worth even your affection."

"Yes, yes," whispered the delighted girl. "I do. I know it."

"You may think he's innocent, Estrella," said Mrs. Canby persistently, "but you can't know anything about it."

"I can know and I do know," was the prompt answer.

A sudden idea came into the old rancher's troubled mind.

"My daughter," he asked gravely, "how do you know?"

He fixed his keen gaze upon her as he spoke.

"Because," answered his elder child, "at the time of which Denton was accused—" she hesitated. She had never said this much to a soul

before but she felt she must go on now, "— he was with me."

Bonita broke away from her and stared unbelievably at her.

"Where?" asked Mrs. Canby, all her suspicions concentrated in this leading question.

"Why, in my drawing room, of course," answered Estrella. "Where should he be? What is the matter?" she asked as the three looked at her in dumb astonishment.

"Did, did the Colonel find you there?" thundered Canby suddenly.

Estrella stared in sudden terror. What did they know? What had they heard? Where had they learned anything? Had Denton—? Impossible! Hodgman, the Colonel, Kellar—? Equally impossible! Yet— It seemed that a confession was to be wrung from her under circumstances which she could not control and which she would have given everything on earth to avoid. She was backed up against the wall as it were, and for a moment without a resource.

"Did the Colonel find you there, I asked," insisted her father, determined to get at the bottom of this.

He was an easy going old man but he could be

terrible when he was thoroughly aroused. And now it seemed that the honour of one daughter and the affections of another were alike at stake.

"The Colonel?" faltered Estrella, staring fascinated at her father.

"Yes," answered Canby pitilessly. "My question's plain enough, ain't it? When you and Denton were together that night, did the Colonel come in of a sudden and make trouble about it?"

"With whom have you been talking?" asked Estrella, her voice rising and trembling with nervousness.

"What difference?" thundered Canby.

"With Captain Hodgman," answered Bonita.

"My God!" exclaimed the wretched wife, bursting into tears. "To my own people! What a coward!"

CHAPTER XIV

Wherein Fate, Open-eyed at Last, Squares One Account

INTO the dining room at this most inopportune time and yet to his wife's great relief, for she fore-saw that if something did not intervene she would be forced to that complete explanation she dreaded, came the Colonel. He was followed by the Doctor. He shot a quick glance at his wife, full of passionate longing which he had instantly repressed. All sorts of suspicions, as has been said, had grown in the Colonel's breast, not tangible ones exactly, but none the less powerful on that account. He had bidden Estrella good-bye before. He had steeled his heart to go away and make no sign, but in common decency he had to pay some attention to her again, especially as the others in the room, their suspicions fully aroused, stood staring from the husband to the wife. He stepped slowly toward her.

"Good-bye," he said formally, and then with a gentler intonation, "don't cry about our going."

Estrella drew her handkerchief away from her

eyes as she heard her husband's voice and extended both hands to him in humble and hopeless appeal. He looked at her steadily a moment and then slowly shook his head. Canby, with a delicacy and a feeling that he sometimes exhibited in spite of his brusque roughness, took his wife by the arm and gently but firmly turned her away. Bonita followed and the three engaged the Doctor in desultory conversation, leaving the Colonel with his wife.

"Frank," began the woman with pitiable timidity, "don't humiliate me here, before my father, however you may distrust me."

Very beautiful and very appealing she looked. The Colonel's heart melted until his eye caught sight of a gorgeous blossom at her breast.

"Where did you get that rose?" he asked harshly.

"Bonita put it there," answered Estrella promptly. She detached it from its fastening and extended it to him. "Will you have it?" she asked deprecatingly.

"No," said her husband and then his heart repented of his brusqueness as he saw his wife shrink back, as if from a blow, and slowly return the flower to its place at her neck — which his lips would fain have pressed.

Always in her mind lay the consciousness that she was unworthy of this man's love and that made her timid. She could only look, she could only offer. She was his for the taking or the rejection like the flower. There was no other way. She was just his—that was all. He did not, would not, could not see; but it was true.

"Denton is here?" continued the Colonel, interrogatively desirous of seeing the effect of the sudden naming of this man, to whom he had not once referred since his resignation.

"Yes," faltered Estrella miserably.

"Did you know it?" asked the husband, his jealousy flaming.

The poor distracted wife had of course to admit that she had known it. She was loath to do so, for she could read her husband's mind like a book.

"Is that why you asked me to bring you here," went on the Colonel, "while I —"

"No, no," interrupted Estrella. "I didn't want to be left alone at the Post while you were gone, Frank. That was all. And I'll go back if you want me to. I'll go anywhere, I'll do anything you wish."

The Colonel's brow clouded, his lip curled with

something very like a sneer. His wife stepped nearer to him.

"Don't smile at me in that bitter way," she said appealingly. "Don't, don't let my people know that you — you hate me."

"My God!" said the Colonel, his passion breaking through all restraint. "I love you with a perverseness that makes me despise myself."

Estrella's heart leaped at the words. He had not said so much since that night. There was no time for affectation or hesitation. The colour flamed into her cheeks and then faded, leaving them paler than before. She looked him straight in the eye and if ever truth spoke in a voice it was through hers.

"And I love you," she said with low but painful intensity.

It was a pity that she could not add that she had never loved any one else and that she had always been true to him. What followed was true absolutely, but in saying it she could not escape the consciousness and recollection of her frightful folly with Hodgman.

"As for Denton," she added, "there was never a thought between me and him. I swear it."

"We can't talk of it now," said the Colonel, "it's too late."

"It's been two months —" said Estrella.

"Yes, two months," said her husband, losing control of himself, "two months in hell. Don't speak of it now."

"Frank," said his wife, clutching desperately at her parting chance for happiness, "come apart a minute with me."

She took him by the hand, she gripped him with a clasp surprising in one so young and delicate and frail, and half willingly, half unwillingly, the Colonel permitted himself to be led into another room off to the right. Canby, who had been watching the two out of the corner of his eye, said quietly as they withdrew,

"Poor girl, I don't blame her for feelin' sad about his goin'. The Colonel's gittin' to be an old man an' he'd be a pretty easy mark for the fever."

"Well," said the Doctor, "I guess I'll go and get some suspenders and then Miss MacCullagh will have no further cause to look after me. She will have to look after the Colonel."

But before the Doctor took his departure, Sergeant Kellar entered.

"Colonel Bonham, he is here?" asked the old Sergeant, saluting respectfully.

"He just went in the other room a moment," answered Canby. "He'll be right out. How are you, Sergeant?"

"Mr. Canby," said Kellar, "I haf not seen you since my Lena is here."

"Oh, that's all right," said Canby, attempting to forestall an outburst of gratitude, but Kellar was not to be forestalled.

"I never forget it," said the old man. "You haf been fader for two girls, you know how a man's heart is for his only one. And I think about your care for Lena often. I go away better ready 'cause of dat. Dat is so, Doctor, you know."

"I understand," said the Doctor.

"She is here, yet?" asked Kellar, turning to Canby.

"Oh, yes," answered the rancher.

"And she is good girl, now?"

"Splendid girl," said the ranchman heartily, for he really liked the little German woman.

"Mit de men — is behave all right?" went on her old father.

"You bet your life," said Canby heartily.

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"The best vaquero on the place is dead in love with her."

"Yes?" exclaimed Kellar excitedly.

"He wants to marry her," said Mrs. Canby in an unwontedly gentle mood. "I'll go find him."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Kellar, bowing in his awkward way. "Lena likes him, Mr. Canby?"

"I think so."

"Is he German vaquero?"

"No, he's a Mexican, but a pretty good one. He's goin' to Cuba with our volunteers."

"Vell," began Kellar, looking around at Bonita.

"He's coming now," said Canby, looking through the window toward the gate.

"I talk mit him," said Kellar, looking meaningfully at Bonita again and, seeing that the Sergeant wished to be alone with the vaquero, or at least not embarrassed by the presence of the young lady, Bonita smiled and went to the other end of the room.

"You don't have to build a fire under her," laughed Canby. "She can take a hint."

"You want me?" said Tony, appearing at the window.

"Yes," answered Canby. "Come in."

"Is dis de man?" asked the old Sergeant as Tony came in followed by Mrs. Canby.

"That's the man. That's Tony," said Canby, leading his wife to the far side of the room and leaving her with Bonita with whom she at once engaged in animated conversation.

The two men stared at each other in a panic of sudden silence.

"What is the matter?" asked Tony.

"The Sergeant—" began the rancher, clearly amused over the situation, but the Sergeant took the words out of his mouth.

"Mr. Canby tell me," began the old man slowly, "that Lena is—that maybe you like Lena."

"Lena!" exclaimed Tony hotly, not relishing the questioning. "She is my own beezness. For him"—pointing to Canby—"I rope the cow. What I think, what I lofe, is no beezness but there"—he lifted his hand to heaven—"and me." He slapped his breast hard.

"Well, keep your shirt on, Tony," said Canby quietly. "Nobody's kickin' 'bout you."

At this moment Lena came into the room. Seeing her father and Tony together, she glanced

from one to the other in alarm. She half turned to go but something held her to the spot.

"Mr. Canby, he — er — speak fine for you," said Kellar to the vaquero. "If Lena shall like you I am glad. But I don't want some man to like Lena, und den some day find out. It is right de man must know before I go way — now."

"Well," said Canby very gravely, "I think this man does."

"Yes?" said Kellar interrogatively, looking hard at Tony; the old Sergeant was the soul of honour and dignity according to his lights, which by the way were neither small nor dim.

Canby took the matter in hand himself.

"Tony," he said, "you know about the — er — trouble Lena had?"

"Yes, yes," said Tony, his face flaming with passionate anger.

"You see, he knows," said Canby, looking toward Kellar.

"And still, yet?" asked Kellar sturdily.

"What is the difference?" exclaimed Tony. "Some day I marry her. First she tell me his name, and then —" the young vaquero was terrifically wrought up. "Never mind," he said more quietly. "Now she lofes me."

The Doctor burst out into an ejaculation of approval.

"That's Arizona," said old Canby proudly. "We're a little shy on water, but there's as much charity for a woman as you can round up in the Gospel of St. John."

He nodded his head to Tony to go and Tony very reluctantly bowed. Kellar paid him the highest honour he could. He clicked his heels together and saluted.

"Vare is Lena?" asked the Sergeant and Tony paused at the name.

"In the pantry, likely," said Canby. "No, there she is now."

"Lena!" exclaimed her old father, stretching out his arms to her and then as he embraced her he looked helplessly at the rancher.

Canby was equal to the emergency. He pointed to the pantry. With his arm around her waist, Kellar went in. Tony sprang after them. Canby in some hesitation stopped Tony for a moment.

"It is my beezness," protested the vaquero. "With her I go in dere."

The rancher looked at the Doctor who, he somehow fancied, because he was a physician of bodies, must know more about proprieties of this kind than he.

"You bet," said the Doctor heartily. "Let him go."

Whereupon Canby's barring arm dropped and Tony followed the other two.

"Well, I guess I'll go now, myself," said the Doctor.

He turned and ran full tilt into Denton.

"Why, hello, Doctor," exclaimed the young man. "Good of you to ask for me."

"Denton, I'm glad to see you," roared the Doctor, shaking him with both hands and then his eyes fell on the straps on the khaki jacket.

"And those?" pointing to them.

"Volunteers," replied Denton.

"Ask him now," said Bonita to her father. She had been within ear shot of all that had transpired and that name of Denton brought her back. "Before Captain Hodgman goes away with the soldiers," she went on.

"Oh,— er — Denton," said Canby.

Denton turned to him smilingly.

"Captain Hodgman said something here that you ought to know 'bout before you go." Canby was watching him closely and he saw Denton's face cloud over at that name. "It's about your leavin' the Cavalry."

"Well, sir?" said Denton very sharply.

"What was the reason?" Canby blurted out.

"What did Hodgman say?" returned Denton.

Canby paused. He did not like to voice the charge but he had to.

"Something about an officer's wife and — Was that the reason?"

And then Denton paused. He found himself once again in a terribly embarrassing position. As he could not explain Estrella's dereliction and treachery to her husband, so he could not explain it to her father. In the first instance, his commission trembled in the balance, in the second, the woman he loved. She stood staring at him as she had never stared before.

"I can't explain just now," said Denton desperately.

The Doctor, uneasy at this family discussion, turned abruptly.

"You'll excuse me," he said, going out.

"Now," said Canby firmly.

"Not now," said Denton with equal resolution.

"You mean," said the ranchman, looking at his white-faced daughter, "'cause the women are here?"

"No, sir," answered Denton promptly. "The

truth concerns another more than it does myself."

"Captain Denton," said old Canby very slowly. "You know I — er — I —" He glanced from Denton to his daughter. The miserable Bonita slowly wandered over to her father's side. He put his arm about her. "We take a man on here an' ask no questions. We know when he throws his saddle on his horse, whether he understands his business or not. He may be a minister backslidin', or a banker savin' his last lung, or a train robber on his vacation. We don't care. A good many of our most useful men have made their mistakes in life. All we care about now is, will he stand the gaff? Will he set sixty hours in the saddle, holdin' a herd that's tryin' to stampede all the time? Now, without makin' you any fine talk, you can give any one of 'em the fifteen ball. I don't know whether it's something you learned in school, or whether you jest happened to pick the right kind of a grandfather, or what. But your equal has never been in this territory in my time."

"You're very good, sir," said Denton as Bonita kissed her father, and Denton wished that he had been in his place.

He knew that he was in a very precarious posi-

tion. He did not know exactly what other bolt fate was going to launch upon him. He was very watchful, very careful, very anxious, of course.

"All of which," said Canby, apparently greatly relishing the kiss he had received, "is merely to say that my proposition about half owner will still go —" Denton started forward, but Canby put up his hand — "if you explain your leavin' the Cavalry," he continued, "provided the explanation don't hit too near home to me."

"Very well, sir," said Denton.

"And if it does pinch any woman that I'm due to protect," said the man in thunder tones, "I'll protect her all right."

"I hope so," said Denton fervently.

"You know whether you want to talk or not," went on Canby. "But until you do, we copper the daughter proposition," concluded the old rancher with splendid finality.

"You mean," asked Denton, to him the words came like a thunderbolt of destruction, "that you withdraw your consent concerning Miss Bonita?"

"That's what I mean," said the rancher decisively as if there was nothing more to be said.

Now Mrs. Canby had kept silent through all this. There were times when it was not well to interrupt her lord and master she had learned.

He had assumed the reins himself and was doing the driving. He would brook no interference, she knew. She had found no opportunity to say anything yet, although with the best will in the world, but now she could restrain herself no longer. And his closing statement gave her a chance.

"Why!" she exclaimed. "Had you given it?"

"I had," said Canby firmly. "And if the boy squares himself, Mother, as I know he will, you kin buck all you want to. It goes as it lays."

"I'll square myself, sir," said Denton firmly. "I blundered into a false position trying to help a friend," he went on hurriedly. "But before I'll give up the woman I love, or even hurt her by any doubt, I'll tell. And nothing is to be said about it."

"Of course," said Canby, "of course."

"I resigned because, because I —" began Denton and yet when it came to the pinch, he could not tell.

It was Bonita, with a splendid burst of trust and confidence in her lover, who relieved the situation. She moved away from her father to Denton's side. "Captain Denton," she said, extending both her hands, "I don't doubt you."

Mrs. Canby made a movement toward the two but her husband caught her and held her firmly, but gently by the shoulders and then into the room burst Kellar. He was seething with excitement and indignation.

"Lieutenant!" he cried out.

"Oh, Kellar," said Denton. "How are you?"

He went over and shook him by the hand rather glad for the interruption.

"I haf seen my Lena," said the Sergeant.

"Well, what's the matter?" asked Denton.

"She will marry Tony. She tells me and Tony de man's name. Dat damned loafer!" He stopped shaking with rage and indignation. "De damned loafer," he sputtered out, forgetting for a moment the bonds of discipline and the years of faithful subordination and service. "I get even mit him," he gritted through his teeth, "if I hang for it."

"Steady, steady, old man," said Denton, at once realising the cause of Kellar's frightful rage, and at that instant Hodgman, walking to his doom, came into the room.

"I can't stand it," cried Kellar, clenching and unclenching his fingers as he caught sight of the man he had such good cause to hate.

For the moment Denton forgot Kellar. He loosed his grip on the Sergeant's shoulder and stepped toward Hodgman, all the wrongs of the past intensified by this last effort of Hodgman's malignant soul.

"Here's the authority for the charge against you," said Canby, stepping between them. "Captain Hodgman, Captain Denton, Arizona Volunteers and, incidentally, my partner in the cattle business."

He turned to Denton. He was accustomed to seeing affairs of that kind settled off hand and with the readiest weapon.

"Need me?" he said meaningly.

Denton never took his eyes off Hodgman. A move of either man toward his weapon would have precipitated instant interchange of shots.

"Please go, sir," he said to Canby.

"Come on, Mother; come on, kitten," said Canby. "'Tain't no place for women."

And although both women resisted strenuously, he carried them firmly out of the room, leaving the two alone with Kellar in the background.

"Well?" said Denton, stepping nearer to Hodgman.

Hodgman standing rooted to the spot, made no answer. After a moment's pause Denton

roughly shoved his sombrero into the Captain's face and at the same time whipped out his revolver. As Hodgman recoiled his eye fell on the Sergeant standing glaring at him. If he had not been so blinded with rage and fear, he would have seen from Kellar's face and bearing that the secret was at last known.

"Sergeant Kellar!" he exclaimed in relief and mechanically Kellar saluted. "Arrest this man," shouted the Captain.

The moment was so tense with excitement that nobody noticed Tony struggling in the pantry door. Lena had her arms about him as if trying to restrain him.

Kellar saluted again.

"I'll see you damned first," he shouted and then the roar of a heavy pistol rang through the room, followed instantly by the sound of a second shot.

Denton had held his own weapon pointed toward the floor and had accidentally pulled the trigger when startled by the first shot. Hodgman stood erect a moment, a horrible ghastly look upon his face. He gritted his teeth, drew his lip back, raised his hand to his breast, sought to say something, swayed uneasily, crashed down

on the floor. Denton turned to the Sergeant.

"Kellar!" cried the young man in amazement.

"I didn't shoot him," shouted Kellar and the next moment the people in the house and in the patio outside came bursting through the several doors, the Colonel in the lead.

"What's that firing about?" he asked and then his eyes fell upon his prostrate officer. "Why, Captain —"

Hodgman raised himself on one arm, he realised that he was done for. He had the courage of a better man and a spirit of damnable vengeance to carry him through. He pointed feebly at the young officer.

"Denton," he choked out.

"Did you shoot him?" asked Canby.

"No," replied Denton.

He still held his revolver in his hand. The Colonel seized it and quickly examined it.

"An empty shell, and it's hot," he said meaningfully.

"I discharged it by accident," snapped out Denton.

That he was dying, Hodgman knew. At least he would have his revenge. What the effort cost him no one could ever know. He was consist-

ently a blackguard to the last. Some men live badly but make fine ends, and some live well apparently but show their true colours by making bad ones. But Hodgman died as he had lived — a scoundrel, a blackguard, a devil.

"Denton struck me," he forced out the words with great difficulty and in appalling agony. "I told Sergeant Kellar — arrest him. Kellar refused — Denton shot me."

Hodgman then collapsed utterly. He had said his last words apparently. The Doctor knelt down by the unconscious man, tore open his shirt, exposing a ghastly wound.

"Mr. Hallock," said the Colonel to the nearest officer, "put these two men under arrest."

Hallock followed by other officers walked up to Denton and seized him and Kellar. Through the open door and window some of the cowboys of Denton's troop had witnessed this closing scene of the tragedy. They loved Denton. If he had shot Hodgman it was for some good cause. Life was cheap in Arizona. Denton should not be arrested by the soldiers. Revolvers were whipped out, oaths and protestations burst from them as they forced their way into the room in a body. But the officers closed around the pair

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and out they went — Denton bidding his men to withdraw and make no effort at rescue — leaving Bonita half fainting in her father's arms and Mrs. Canby, for the once playing the mother's part, holding poor Estrella next to her heart.



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CHAPTER XV

The Life of the Living is More Important Than the Death of the Dying

EVERYTHING was ready for the departure of the first battalion of the Eleventh Cavalry which would pick up its other battalions en route to Tampa and from thence be transported to the seat of war. Troop trains were made up on the siding of the nearest railroad station and it would require hard marching by the first battalion to reach the station without disarranging the schedule. The time allotted for the halt for water and brief rest had expired, the assembly had been sounded, the Colonel had only stayed for a final farewell before giving the order to march. But the shooting of Hodgman disarranged all plans. Something had to be done about that before the departure. The Colonel had sent off a courier instantly to the nearest telegraph station, advising the superintendent of the railroad of the emergency and requesting the trains to be held and the schedule to be rearranged. Meanwhile, the battalion, in a state of great excitement, was halted again.

The Colonel, of course, did not purpose formally to court-martial Denton. Indeed, since he was out of the regular service and had not yet been mustered with his command into the regiment of Rough Riders that Roosevelt was organising, the matter was for the civil courts of the territory rather than for the army. Yet before the troops went away, some of them never to return again probably, it was necessary to conduct some sort of an investigation so as to leave the matter in shape for indictment and future trial when the accused was turned over to the civil authorities.

The Colonel, therefore, after seeing the unconscious Hodgman carried into the nearest bedroom where he was attended by the Doctor and Miss MacCullagh, moved into the patio followed by the big rancher, his wife and his daughter and all the others present. To the orderly who awaited him he gave some brief commands and presently he was rejoined by Lieutenants Hallock and Young.

Outside the patio a movement of troops began. The cavalrymen were already on their horses and to move them was an easy task. The movements, whatever they were, were accompanied by yells and curses from the vaqueros of the ranch and

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more especially from Denton's troop of Rough Riders who had assembled preparatory to marching to the headquarters of their regiment that same day. The Eleventh Cavalry had been recruited up to its full strength and there were over four hundred men in the first battalion. There were only one hundred cowboys in the troop, but they were armed with six-shooters and they were experts. There was imminent danger of a breach between them and the regulars. Denton was the idol of these rough riders. There was no one to control them in his absence. They had not been sufficiently organised, their other officers were still to be chosen. It was only the iron discipline of the soldiers that kept them quiet under the jeers and taunts of the less disciplined volunteers and that prevented an outbreak.

The Colonel was an old and practised soldier. He was determined to have no outbreak, to engage in no conflict if it could be avoided. He thought deeply, quickly and accurately. He acted promptly. He ordered a heavy guard posted over the main corral to control the horses and he so disposed the rest of his troops as to command the situation. The men of Denton's company could make no attack on any section of the battalion without finding themselves under

the fire, and a cross-fire at that, of the other troops. Colonel Bonham would have been better satisfied if he could have had more officers to assist in his investigation but on account of the gravity of the situation without he had to leave most of his officers, and especially the older ones, with the troops.

Hallock and Young were steady youngsters, however, and he would do the best he could with them. If things quieted down he would summon the officers of A Troop also. The gate was open still and through it the angry excited rough riders, buzzing like disturbed hornets, could see what was toward. Yet Captain Cochran, the next ranking officer of the battalion, had the situation well in hand. For a moment the Colonel had an idea of driving the Rough Riders away from the vicinity of the ranch but after all they were citizens of the United States and their own officer was concerned and he decided to let them come near, provided he had them under observation and control.

"Tell Captain Cochran to let those volunteers come near but to keep outside of the gate," he said to the orderly.

"B Troop engaged in that duty now, sir," interrupted Hallock, saluting.

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"Very well," said the Colonel. "My compliments to the Captain, Orderly, and tell him to keep them there and let the rest of the battalion be ready to move just as soon as we get over this business, which I hope will be shortly."

"Yes, sir," said the orderly, saluting and going briskly out.

"The men from this ranch want to git their horses out of the corral," roared Canby who was intensely angered over the situation. "Those animals are their private property an' you've no right—"

Ordinarily these two men were the best of friends. They respected each other and they esteemed each other. But in this instance the Colonel wasted no words with the rancher.

"They can't have 'em," he said resolutely. "They've shown a disposition to make trouble and I'll keep 'em away from the corral till we go."

Canby opened his mouth but the Colonel silenced him.

"That's enough," he said. "I've four troops to your one and—"

The old rancher locked his jaws and clenched his fists but to argue with the Colonel was useless.

"Mr. Young," went on the Colonel.

"Colonel," answered the Lieutenant, saluting.

"Ask Dr. Fenlon how Captain Hodgman is doing."

"Yes, sir," answered the young man, saluting again and turning into the house.

The Colonel stood waiting until his officer's return. He was also waiting for some one who was not there, waiting with ever increasing anxiety, alarm and suspicion for his wife. All that he had suffered before went for naught. It counted little beside the present. Was it indeed Denton in whom his wife had taken such an interest? Was Denton's story true? Had Denton been a thief, had his theft ended in murder? And what part had Hodgman played in the whole transaction? He must have wronged Denton terribly for Denton to have shot him. Certainly Hodgman had not been responsible for Denton's theft or for his love for Estrella Bonham, if he had loved her. And yet Denton had shot him. Why?

There had to be some motive somewhere to induce so cheerful and genial a young man as Denton to resort to murder. How had Hodgman got mixed up in the affair? Was it Hodgman after

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all rather than Denton that had — The Colonel felt that he had sore need of all his calmness and discrimination and of all his courage. Yet where was Estrella? Every one in the house had heard the shot. No one could be ignorant of what had happened; besides, Estrella had been there. He had seen her in her mother's arms.

Under a pretence of looking after things, she had followed the Doctor and Miss MacCullagh and the bearers who had carried Hodgman into the house. That was her place of course. The wife of the Colonel could be employed in nothing better than in ministering to one of his wounded officers.

The Colonel had plenty of time to recall her terrific agitation. He had heard her scream when she learned that Hodgman had been shot. Of course, any shooting affair would unsettle a highly nervous woman like Estrella. Still, the Doctor and Miss MacCullagh could take care of Hodgman without her assistance. Why did Estrella stay there? If his suspicions of Denton were warranted, was Estrella's absence from the courtyard significant? If she were in love with Denton would she not be present at all hazards? Could she have been in love with Hodgman, that

she lingered by his side? The Colonel could not make it out. The demon of doubt had got hold of him and was torturing him.

Well, his duty was as clear as his thoughts were complex. It wasn't the first time that the clear call of duty had sounded through all the suggestions and insinuations and anxieties of the mind. And he was glad that he had some duty to occupy him in his distraction.

In this mood, the Colonel had no desire for conversation, therefore he did not make any. It was Bonita who broke the silence.

"Colonel Bonham," she said.

"Bonita," he answered sharply and yet with a little note of pity.

He liked the girl and besides she was Estrella's sister. She looked wretchedly unhappy. Was it possible that she had become interested in Hodgman? No, that was absurd. Denton had been an inmate of the ranch for the last two months. Had he, failing with one sister, made play with another? But Bonita gave him no time to think.

"That guard won't let me speak to Mr. Denton," said the girl indignantly.

"Those were my orders," replied the commanding officer.

"Why?"

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"I do not want anybody to see either of the prisoners."

"Well, ain't that jest a little high-handed with one of my men?" protested old Canby. "He ain't been found guilty yet an' I don't call it—"

"Call it anything you like, Canby," said the Colonel brusquely. "It goes. You know better than to buck against a battalion of cavalry, don't you?"

"I ain't looking for any trouble," said Canby wrathfully, "but when anybody puts my ranch under martial law, I'm going to holler some an'—"

"Holler all you want to," said the Colonel, "but let it end there."

He was rather glad of this altercation with Canby. It was a little diversion from his thoughts. The whole affair had touched him on the raw. Leaving no time for Canby to answer or even to let him enjoy that "holler" which he was perfectly willing he should make, Colonel Bonham turned to Lieutenant Young who came from the house and saluted.

"Well?" he said.

"Doctor Fenlon is probing for the ball," answered the young man. "He will be here in a minute to report, sir."

"By God!" said Canby very low and yet not

so low that any one might not hear. "If he wasn't Estrella's husband —"

"Mr. Young," said Bonita impulsively.

"Miss Canby," said Young, throwing an admiring glance at her.

"They've got Mr. Denton in the blacksmith's shop, under guard. Will you —"

She stopped, not liking to make a request before the assemblage but seeing no other way.

"Will I what, Miss Canby?"

"Will you take him a letter for me?"

"You won't send any letter to that man, Bonita Canby," snapped out her mother, starting forward as if to seize the letter her daughter extended to the young officer.

"Well, hold on," said old Canby. "I reckon," with a vicious look at the Colonel, "one commanding officer's enough, Mother. You write your letter, Bonita."

"It's written," said Bonita, showing it to her father.

"Give it to Mr. Young, then."

The letter was accordingly handed to the young lieutenant who took it uncertainly.

"Bonita!" exclaimed Mrs. Canby.

"Mother," interposed Canby, restraining her forward movement.

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"Am I under martial law like the rest of you, Henry Canby?" indignantly expostulated his wife.

"No," answered Canby. "But you ain't sellin' any too high in the pools."

The Colonel had watched this little colloquy with a faint gleam of amusement. Young turned to his superior and showed him the letter.

"Colonel?" he asked.

"No," answered the Colonel.

"Good!" exclaimed Mrs. Canby, glad to interpose by any means between her daughter and Denton, to whom she had taken an unaccountable dislike.

"Sorry, Miss Canby," said Young, returning the letter which the girl took most reluctantly, biting her lip and striving to control her tears.

Bonita stood for a moment in helplessness, holding the letter. Then her eyes turned to her father, her good strong father, to whom she never appealed in vain, and an idea shot through Canby's brain. He dragged an old leather pocketbook out and almost shouted:

"Gimme that letter, Bonita."

"Here it is," said the girl, feeling that something was about to come off now.

From the pocketbook Canby took a two-cent

stamp. He licked it elaborately and then almost hammered it down on the letter.

"There," he said. "There's a two-cent stamp on it. Now, I reckon the United States mail is about as big as the Eleventh Cavalry."

Crumpling the letter in his hand in his excitement, he started toward the gate.

"Splendid, Pa!" cried the girl, clapping her hands and smiling almost for the first time since the shooting.

"I'll deliver the letter myself," continued the rancher.

"Henry Canby," came the sharp voice of his wife just as her husband was about to pass through the gate.

"Well, Madam?" said Canby formally, turning about.

"If you carry that letter to him, I put on my bonnet."

"You do?" asked Canby, his eyes glittering.

"I do," said Mrs. Canby with equal resolution.

"We've had our understanding. It ain't no fault of mine that these two offspring was girls, but they are girls, and they're in my department."

"Well, here's a letter with a United States brand on it," said Canby, waving it aloft. "The

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Government buys my beef, and bonnet or no bonnet, Mother, I put this in the right corral."

He had called Mrs. Canby's bluff, but whether it was a bluff or not could not be determined as the Colonel interposed again.

"Canby," he said sharply.

"Well?" said Canby.

"Don't be a fool," went on the Colonel. "I've got twenty minutes in which to make an investigation and turn Denton, or some other guilty man, over to the authorities with the facts. Every attempt of yours or of any of his friends will hamper that and will react against him. You have sense enough to see that yourself."

"Well, make your investigation," said Canby. "Why don't you begin?"

He spoke with great irritation and as he grew more irritable and angry, the more cool the Colonel became. The soldier could face actual difficulties and involved situations much easier than he could face his own speculations and the devious ways in which they led him.

"I haven't had a chance," answered the Colonel bitterly. "Your punchers are showing fight and taking my attention. I don't want to fire on them but we're getting where a half hour is worth more

to us than their lives, and I'm sorry to say, more than yours."

"But fair play, fair play," roared Canby.

"In what?"

"In this investigation."

"Bring in two of Denton's company to hear it then," said the Colonel quietly. "Two of the quietest, most level-headed men, if you can find any, in the bunch."

"Now, you're talking," said Canby.

"Mr. Young," said Colonel Bonham, "go with him. Orderly," he went on.

"Yes, sir?" said the orderly at the gate.

"Ask Captain Cochran and the commissioned officers of A Troop to come here."

"Yes, sir," said the orderly, going out.

"Now, if the rest of you will give us a chance— Ah, Doctor," continued the Colonel, anxiously turning toward the physician who at that moment came out from the house.

"Haven't finished, Colonel," said Doctor Fenlon. "We've done what we could, we've given him heart stimulants and we're only—" he paused—"waiting."

"H'm," said the Colonel. "Have you found the ball?"

"We've located it, but there's no use trying to

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extract it," replied the Doctor. "It would be too painful unless we use chloroform, and he wouldn't rally from that."

"What are his chances?" asked the Colonel.

"None," said the Doctor with a shake of the head.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. He's as good as a dead man now."

"Then get the ball."

"You don't mean —"

"Get it now," said the Colonel. "The life of a man depends upon it," he added in explanation as the Doctor saluted and turned away.

On a sudden impulse the Colonel followed him and so came face to face with his wife in the doorway. He stepped aside almost as if he had not seen her, to give her room to pass. Her face had been ghastly pale but it flamed at the sight of her husband. He had his head up, however, and did not look at her. He could not see the piteous glance she cast at him.

"Will he die, Colonel?" asked Bonita, coming to the rescue and saying the first thing that came into her mind.

She had heard all that the Doctor had said, of course, but she saw the tenseness of the situation

between the Colonel and his wife and she wanted to relieve it, which was very noble of her, for Hodgman's death would make it most terrible for her lover if he were guilty, which she could not bring herself to believe although the circumstances were so condemning.

As the Colonel nodded and passed into the house, Estrella came down into the courtyard.

"Bonita," she began.

But what she was about to say was interrupted by Bonita, who ran toward her.

"Do you think he shot him?" she asked.

"I don't know," faltered Estrella.

She and she alone possessed the clue to any state of affairs which could induce Denton to shoot Hodgman. She was very fearful, indeed, that, carried away by the recollection of the wrongs that he had suffered at this man's hands, in a moment of passion he had pressed the trigger of his revolver and it was his bullet that had laid the blackguard on the ground. Estrella had not been with the dying Hodgman in the house. She had been alone, nerving herself to the confession which she saw now must be made. She alone could furnish justification for Denton if he were guilty. Her words, if he had shot Hodgman, might serve to set him free. She could sacrifice Denton's

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reputation in her husband's eyes for her own honour and her husband's love, but she could not sacrifice his life and her sister's happiness. She had been selfish, cowardly apparently. But since she had not won the Colonel's love again, for she felt him slipping away from her, she was glad, even rejoiced, that the moment of confession had come.

CHAPTER XVI

How Tony Mostano Gave his Testimony in the Trial and Got Away

AND still when she came to the point, womanlike, she shrank from it for the moment and gave that evasive answer. It was Mrs. Canby's next remark that added the needed fire to her resolution.

"You say you don't know whether he shot him or not," began that worthy mother. "Had he any reason to do it?"

Estrella was face to face with the issue at last. It could not be evaded or put aside any longer. It had to be met. She was glad to get it over with. And she was glad to confess first to her own people, get their sympathy and support and then, so backed up, to tell her husband. There was good stuff in the Colonel's wife, although she had been sadly lacking in that one instance. She looked her mother straight in the eye and answered her firmly,

"Yes, he had."

Bonita's suspicions had been aroused by her sister's strange conduct in spite of her affection,

and an ejaculation burst from her lips, an exclamation of surprise, astonishment and jealousy. Estrella realised instantly what it meant.

"But the reason did not concern Denton and me," she said swiftly.

"Why then?" asked Bonita eagerly.

"If Denton shot him it was because Hodgman lied when he said that Denton cared for me."

"He didn't, did he?" asked Bonita, oblivious to anything else.

"No. And of all the men on earth in the world, Hodgman knew that it was a lie when he said it."

"Estrella, Estrella!" cried Bonita, seizing her sister by the arm and looking anxiously into her face as if to read the truth. Estrella faced her undauntedly and returned her gaze.

"No, he did not," she repeated, slipping her arm around the young girl's shoulders, and Bonita in the relief of her heart met Estrella's embrace with a warmer one of her own.

But Mrs. Canby was not convinced.

"I don't care what you say," she said, "Hodgman says that Denton shot him and the Doctor says that Hodgman's got no chance."

"Will he die?" exclaimed Estrella Bonham.

After all, she had once loved this man or she

had thought so. He had played some part in her life. To him was due the misery she suffered, to him and to her own folly, and she could not hear of his fate without some emotion — was it joy, relief — what?

“Yes,” replied her mother.

“But what can they do to Denton?” asked Bonita, as her sister stood staring and stunned by this announcement.

Bonita’s concern was not so much with the dead Hodgman as with the living Denton.

“You ought to know,” said Mrs. Canby grimly. “You was born here and you’ve lived here all your life. What do you think they’ll do?”

“Oh,” exclaimed the girl, throwing up her hands, “if I were only a man.”

“Wouldn’t count much with a jury,” said her mother, but Bonita wasn’t looking at her.

Tony, indifferent as ever, came strolling across the patio, cigarette in hand and looking as if he had never a care on earth. Estrella’s words had supplied the motive for the shooting of Hodgman, her mother’s words had brought vividly before the girl her lover’s possible fate. In the oncoming vaquero she saw a way out of danger for

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Denton, not a permanent way, but a temporary one whereby he might gain time for defence, or to perfect his plans. Anything to her mind was better than waiting in prison. Bonita was a girl of the West, accustomed to thinking quickly and to acting promptly. She was her father's own child in that.

"Tony," she exclaimed, as the vaquero turned the corner of the house and was about to pass out of sight.

Off came the great sombrero and it swept to the ground gracefully.

"Yes, Señorita?" said the young Mexican.

He liked Bonita. Everybody on the place adored her as they had before adored her sister.

"They're going to give Major-Domo up to the Sheriff at Tucson. He'll be charged with murder."

"Not by damn sight," said Tony instantly, straightening up, losing all his nonchalant indifference, his eyes flashing.

"They will try," continued the delighted Bonita, seeing the effect of her words.

Like all his passionate and excitable race Tony was fond of attitudinizing. He promptly struck an attitude now.

"Before they get by Tucson," he said, "one hundred vaquero stops him."

"Now see here, Tony," cried Mrs. Canby severely, "no devilment."

"Maybe you won't have to wait for that," said Bonita suggestively, lowering her voice. "Maybe some chance will happen for him to get away from here before."

"Yes, yes," said Tony.

"Now, if he had my horse —" continued Bonita.

"Cochise!" cried Tony, his eyes glittering as the picture of the gallant thoroughbred came into his mind.

Old Canby stinted his daughters in nothing. Cow ponies were good enough for most people but the heiress of the Aravaipa ranch must ride a blooded horse. On an all-day hunt the cow pony might tire him out but for a mad gallop away, there was no horse in the Cavalry regiment that could take his measure.

"Yes, Cochise," said Bonita.

"Ah," laughed the vaquero meaningly.

He put his fingers to his lips and then threw them up into a kiss of imaginary farewell. He understood everything.

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"The cavalrymen are guarding the corral," continued Bonita.

"He is no there," answered Tony. "I have him in the little stable back of the house yonder."

Not asking what had prompted Tony to put him there but thankful for the fact, Bonita continued.

"Put the Major-Domo's saddle on him then."

"Yes, yes, Señorita, I understand," said the vaquero.

"And you'll have him ready at the gate for a bolt?"

"I will, Señorita. To hell with Fort Grant soldiers," said the vaquero. "You tal me, I rope the Colonel heself."

He turned and ran back at a pace quite different from his languid entrance. The two had wandered away and Mrs. Canby had not quite caught the purport of what was going on, but seeing her daughter free she began,

"Now, Bonita, whenever you've done with your highfalutins, we'll get back to earth. Mr. Denton'll take his chances with the law, same as any other man that gits too gay with his gun."

"Let's not talk about it, Mother," said Bonita coolly enough, yet with her heart beating with

hope at the thought of the plan she had devised by her suggestion to Tony, and which she knew she could trust the vaquero to carry out, while further discussion was stopped by the entrance of Captain Cochran and several other officers.

"The Colonel sent for us," said the Captain to Estrella just as the Commanding Officer himself came out of the house.

"Be seated, gentlemen," said the Colonel, pointing to chairs which had been placed around the table in the patio by the Chinese boy, Sam. "Orderly, tell the Sergeant of the Guard to bring Captain Denton and Sergeant Kellar in here."

"Colonel," said Mrs. Canby.


"Mrs. Canby," returned the Colonel abruptly.

He did not want to be interrupted by any feminine discussion now, but he was really occupying the Canby ranch and accepting its hospitality, and while there was little love lost between the Colonel and his mother-in-law, he would fain treat her courteously.

"You might as well know there's a petticoat plot to rescue Mr. Denton being hatched up here by —"

The Colonel looked hard at Estrella, all his suspicions to the fore.

"By me," said Bonita quickly.



"Oh," said the Colonel indifferently.

He had not any faith in the outcome of any plots which Bonita might be making. He turned away but the girl was not to be put off. She went up to him and spoke to him directly.

"Colonel," she said, "I've always tried to be friends with you."

"I'm sure of that, Bonita," replied the Colonel quietly.

"And this isn't a time to mince matters," she went on, "or for a girl to play at being shy. I love that man you've got under guard, and any advantage you take over him, is one you take over me, too. I feel just that way about it. And any chance you give him, or fair play, goes double. Understand?"

"Perfectly," said the Colonel.

"The war's on and I guess the regiment'll get into enough trouble down in Cuba," continued Bonita, "and this one man needn't keep you sitting up nights."

"Bonita," said the Colonel gravely, "I held Denton on my knee when he wasn't larger than that. It's been a long time since but I haven't forgotten it and if he's got a show on God's earth with any one it's with me."

The Colonel stopped and then he offered Bo-

nita his hand. She took it in both her own as Canby, followed by two of the most reliable of Denton's troop, came into the patio.

"Who saddled Cochise?" asked Canby, as Tony led the horse to the gate.

Bonita stopped him.

"It was done for me," she said, shooting him a meaning glance.

He had sense enough to see that something was up, although just what he could not tell, and therefore did not pursue the subject. Meanwhile, Lena came out of the house as Denton and Kellar surrounded by dismounted troopers under arms came through the gate.

"Father!" exclaimed Lena, starting impulsively to embrace the old Sergeant.

"Stand back," said the Colonel sharply. "Gentlemen, as you know, Captain Hodgman was shot in that room half an hour ago. I have asked you to meet me here to look into the matter and if possible determine the guilty man. These men of the volunteers are here as friends of the prisoner."

"Very good, sir," said Cochran.

"Mr. Hallock, take your place at the table and act as recorder."

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"Pen, ink and paper, Sam," roared Canby and in a moment the boy placed the writing materials on the table before the young officer.

"Ready?" asked the Colonel.

"Yes, sir," answered Hallock, spreading the paper before him.

The Colonel drew out of the pocket of his blouse a paper.

"This is Captain Hodgman's *ante mortem* statement which he hasn't had the strength so far to sign. Will you examine it, Mr. Canby? It affirms that without provocation Captain Denton, commanding a company of Arizona Volunteers, struck Captain Hodgman of the Eleventh United States Cavalry in the face with his hat and thereafter without any retaliating blow from Hodgman, shot Hodgman. File that paper when Mr. Canby returns it. Mark it Exhibit A."

"Yes, sir."

"I entered the room myself at the sound of the shot. Write that down, Mr. Hallock," continued the Colonel, speaking very slowly to give the officer time to make his notes. "Have you got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I placed Captain Denton and Sergeant Kellar

of the Eleventh United States Cavalry, under arrest. Kellar's daughter, Lena, was also there. I took from Denton his weapon which is here —" he lifted a heavy revolver from the table. "It's a Colt's Army .44. The chamber under the hammer is empty. When I took it the barrel was warm from a recent discharge. Tag it, Mr. Hallock, and mark it Exhibit B on the tag and also in your minutes."

"Got nothing for a tag, sir," said Hallock.

"Take the back of your writing tablet," said the Colonel impatiently.

He took the pasteboard back, tore it into two pieces and threw it on the table.

"I'm through with this," said Canby, handing Hodgman's statement to the recorder. "I've read it and I believe it's a damn lie."

"H'm," said the Colonel evidently not greatly impressed. "Captain Denton," he went on, "how do you say?"

But now Tony Mostano, having left Cochise at the gate in the care of a most willing cowboy, swiftly stepped to the side of the prisoner and before any one could stop him, whispered a few words to him. Denton made no sign that he heard what the vaquero had said as he walked to the centre of the patio.

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"My answer is a denial." He stopped and then continued slowly so that Hallock could take his words down. "I did strike him with my hat. I whipped my revolver out ready for whatever he might do. The shot came from some one else to my right, to Captain Hodgman's left. The report startled me. I gave an involuntary pressure to my trigger and fired. As Hodgman fell, I turned to Sergeant Kellar thinking he had fired but his hands were empty."

Tony, who had been listening with all his ears, now quietly sauntered down toward the centre of the courtyard, after a whispered word or two with the cowboy holding Cochise, a high-bred racer if ever there was one moving uneasily as if anxious to be off. Denton's manner was absolutely calm and collected if deeply grave. There was not the slightest evidence of agitation in his bearing or words. He made his statement in the most convincing way. Canby and the two cowboys nodded approvingly. But the Colonel went on with the investigation.

"You admit striking Captain Hodgman?" he asked.

"I do," answered Denton quickly.

"Why?" asked the Colonel and in spite of

himself his own personal anxiety was expressed in the question.

Denton for the first time hesitated, thinking how far he could safely go in his reply.

"A personal matter," he said. "He had lied about me to my employer. I might say, my partner in business."

"Partner in business is right," said Canby in his great voice.

"What had he said, sir?" asked the Colonel instantly.

He waited a few moments but Denton preserved an immovable silence.

"Mr. Hallock, write down that prisoner declines to answer."

"Answer him," thundered Canby.

"The man has that right, Mr. Canby," said the Colonel.

"Answer, Captain Denton," said Bonita but Denton shook his head and set his jaw more firmly.

Bonita took the matter in her own hands. She turned to the Colonel.

"He told my father and me that Captain Denton was forced to resign from the regular army —"

"Bonita!" exclaimed Denton, stepping forward as if to silence her.

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Hallock's pen was going furiously.

"Stop," said the Colonel; "don't write until I tell you. Why?"

"Because of another man's wife," answered Bonita.

"And he intimated your wife," snapped out Mrs. Canby.

Estrella sank to her knees her head against the railing of the porch and covered her face. It was out! But no —

"Then he did lie," said the Colonel calmly and he was never a bigger man in his life than then. "Write that down."

"I knew it, I knew it! Estrella!" cried Bonita, running to her sister's side, putting her arms about her and raising her up.

The Colonel now turned his attention to the other prisoner.

"Sergeant Kellar," he began.

The old Sergeant stepped forward two paces as Denton stepped back under cover of the guard. Standing very erect Kellar saluted. Ordinarily he was one of the smartest soldiers in the regiment in spite of his years of service. Now, he looked old and haggard and worn, quite fit for retirement, a sad expression on his weather-beaten fea-

tures. It was only by an effort that he could assume and maintain his position.

"Did you see Captain Denton shoot Captain Hodgman?" asked the Colonel.

"No, sir," answered Kellar.

"Were you present?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you watching the man?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you didn't see him shoot Hodgman?"

"No, sir."

"Well, why didn't you see him shoot him?" asked the Colonel.

Kellar hesitated.

"I looked around, sir," he answered.

"Why?" the Colonel pressed him.

After a longer pause Kellar replied.

"Dere was a noise behind. I looked around to see. Den Lieutenant Denton—"

"Captain Denton, remember, Hallock," said the Colonel.

"Captain Denton he look at me and say, 'Kellar,' and I say, 'I didn't shoot him.'"

"H'm," said the Colonel. "You say there was a noise behind you?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was the noise?"

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But Kellar was now as dumbly silent before his inquisitorial commander as Denton had been.

"The noise behind you, what was it?" went on the Colonel. "Answer me," he said, impatient at this seeming conspiracy of silence.

"It was me," said Lena, coming forward.

"You!" exclaimed the Colonel in amazement.

Was it possible that Lena had shot Hodgman? if so, why? He knew of her trouble, of course, but he had never connected Hodgman with it.

"Your daughter, Lena?" said the Colonel to Kellar.

"Yes, sir."

The Colonel was very much annoyed at having the poor girl brought into the case in this way. He picked up Hodgman's *ante mortem* statement and read it over. The others waited his pleasure anxiously.

"Captain Hodgman says he had previously ordered you to arrest Captain Denton?" he began.

"Yes, sir," answered Kellar.

"Why did you disobey orders; you, a soldier of forty years' experience?"

Kellar stared dumbly, his face working.

"Why, why?" persisted the Colonel.

Kellar clenched his fists and stepped forward, his old lean face red with rage and shame. He

did not know how to answer him, and yet he must say something.

"He was a damned loafer," the old Sergeant gritted out. "My Lena — he ruined her, he ruined my Lena!"

"What!" exclaimed the Colonel in amazement. "Impossible!"

"Yes, sir. By Gott in Himmel he done it. If de whole army kills me. I am —"

But the Colonel interrupted him. Here was a new trail. Whither did it lead?

"Did you shoot him?" asked the Colonel suddenly.

"No, sir," thundered Kellar. "I wish I had. I would haf liked to."

"The noise that distracted you — was it a gun shot?"

There was no answer.

"Was it a gun shot?"

"Yes, sir," replied Kellar.

The Colonel turned and fixed his eye on Lena who stood very white, covered with shame and humiliation before them all.

"A gun shot behind you?" he said reflectively. "Were those his words, Hallock?"

"A noise from behind him, sir," replied Hallock, consulting his notes.

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"And when you turned, your daughter Lena, was there?"

"Yes, sir," said Kellar who was slow witted and dazed and did not see whither this questioning tended.

For a moment the merciless cross-examination was interrupted. Doctor Fenlon came from the room, his coat off, his sleeves rolled up, his arms dabbled with blood. He had something in his hand. The Colonel faced him swiftly.

"Well, sir?" he said.

"The ball," answered the Doctor, saluting.

He handed the leaden bullet to the Colonel and returned immediately to the house.

"Mr. Hallock," said the Colonel, "mark Exhibit C, ball extracted from Captain Hodgman's breast by Doctor Fenlon." He examined the ball closely with a critical eye. "This ball is a .38." There was a long pause. Every man and nearly every woman there knew what that meant. "Mr. Denton," said the Colonel, "your revolver is a .44." The Colonel picked up the weapon and re-examined it to reassure himself. "Evidently you did not fire the shot that killed Captain Hodgman," he added.

Old Canby, unmindful of the seriousness of the situation, of the fact that a man was dying inside

and that there were two who were not cleared of suspicion before him, let out a yell and threw up his hat. The two most steady-going cowboys followed suit. Those in the gateway spread the news and the whole country around broke into wild cheering in which even the troops who had loved Denton before he had left the army joined in. The noise seemed to relieve Tony, who had taken position upon the edge of the porch, cigarette in hand, outwardly as indifferent as ever but, nevertheless, keenly alive to all that was going on.

"Thank you, sir," said Denton, advancing. "That's my revolver." He extended his hand for it. "May I have it?"

The Colonel hesitated a minute, his hand went to his own holster.

"It's part of this record. Take mine," he said with exquisite courtesy, proffering his own weapon.

It was as if he had given him back his sword. The honour he did the young officer was unmistakable. Denton's face flushed with pleasure. He shot a glance at the girl who had never failed him, to see if she had noted, but he made no present attempt to go to her. It was the Colonel who spoke again.

"Lena Kellar."



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"Mein Lena!" said the Sergeant, but the Colonel stopped him with a fierce call to attention.

"Lena," he said, looking directly at her, "do you know who fired this shot?"

"One minute, Colonel," said Canby, quickly.

He was overjoyed at the clearance of Denton but his heart went out to that poor girl, and now that the part Hodgman had played in the undoing of the young girl had been made public, he was sorry he had not shot him himself.

"The girl must answer or decline to answer," said the Colonel harshly.

"That's jest what I want her to know," returned the big rancher. "If her answer would in any way go against her, she can keep still if she wants to."

Tony's cigarette had gone out. He calmly struck a match at this juncture and lighted another cigarette. The affair suddenly became interesting since Lena became an object of suspicion.

"Do you know who fired this shot that struck Captain Hodgman?" began the Colonel again.

But Lena stood dumb before him. He waited and as there came no reply he turned to Hallock.

"Declines to answer. Did you shoot him yourself?"

Again this question was met with silence.

"Declines to answer," he said the second time. "Did you know Captain Hodgman? Had you any motive for injuring him, or wishing him injury?"

Lena was made of the same stubborn stuff as the others. She bit her lip, faced him with eyes full of tears but she made no reply.

"Declines to answer," said the Colonel to the Lieutenant. "Lena, as you were the only person present at the time of the shooting, as your father testifies that you had just cause of complaint against Captain Hodgman, and as your silence indicates you are in possession of facts concerning the shooting, if you did not actually commit it, I warn you that I must place you under arrest and turn you over to the civil authorities to be tried for —" he paused — "for murder."

"Mein Gott!" exclaimed the old Sergeant but he had not time to say further, for Tony suddenly stalked into the centre of the group.

"No!" he said roughly.

"What do you want here?" asked the Colonel.

"Do you know anything about it?"

"I know everything," said Tony.

"Well, what have you got to say?"

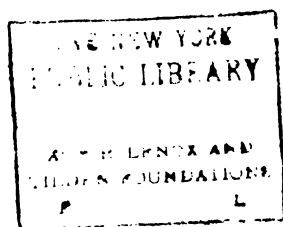
"I shoot him myself. My gun .38," he said,



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"YOUR CHOICE."

From Douglas Fairbanks—Arctograph Picture



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drawing it out lightly. "I love her. She will be my wife. Me, Tony Mostano."

His bravado and composure were magnificent. He made his confession without a thought apparently of what danger for himself was involved in it. The others stared at him, some of them at least with approbation and admiration. He put his arm around the girl and with a most brazen assurance stared them all in the face.

"Well," said the Colonel with great relief, "that simplifies everything."

"And with an Arizona jury," roared old Canby, "it's a cinch."

"Perhaps so," said the Colonel. "Captain Cochran, detail two men to take this vaquero to Tucson."


"Yes, sir," answered the Captain, rising to make the detail.

"One minute," said Tony not at all alarmed. "While he writes,"—the vaquero pointed to Hallock who was still busy over his papers—"if you all step back, I show you how," he said to the Colonel and the Colonel unthinkingly stepped back.

Tony's adroitness had opened a clear way between him and the gate.

"I was in the kitchen; Mr. Denton he struck him; these men are there. Hodgman, damn him, is there. Lena tells me at last this is the man. I look out the door so. I pop him — bang! I jump back — so."

He told his story dramatically with many gestures and much movement. He had gained himself a clear passage and as he finished he made a run toward the gate. There was none to prevent him. He sprang to the back of Cochise. The cowboy who was holding the horse was glad to release the bridle. Tony waved his sombrero, laughed and in a moment he was gone, the hoofs of the horse ringing on the hard ground as he galloped madly away.



CHAPTER XVII

The Colonel Kisses a Rose in Forgiveness and Farewell

FOR a second or two no one stirred, no one spoke. It was naturally the veteran soldier who first came to his senses.

"Stop him," he thundered.

Running toward the open gate with the agility of a boy, outdistancing the other officers and men who started at the same time, he shouted out his orders. But quickly as he ran the big rancher got ahead of him. At a wave of his hand the two cowboys slammed the gate in the Colonel's face, dropped the bar and stood before it menacingly, Canby joining them. There was a chorus of yells and cheers outside. The soldiers had no orders to stop the fugitive. They did not know what this wild gallop meant. There was no horse in the regiment to catch the gallant Cochise, ridden as nobody but Tony could ride him unless it was Bonita.

"Open those gates," said the Colonel, roughly shouldering the cowboys aside and facing his stubborn and unruly father-in-law and host.

The delighted Canby now judged that Tony had made good his escape so he turned around, smiling over the turn of events.

"Why, certainly, Colonel," he said genially, at the same time making a great show of force but applying very little power to the bar and gates, as he slowly got the men away and opened the gates once more.

Colonel Bonham and Captain Cochran raced out. The soldiers following raised their rifles.

"He's through the line, sir," said Cochran. "Shall they fire?"

"No, no!" screamed Lena.

The Colonel hesitated, he was really glad that Tony had got away and he acknowledged in his heart that Hodgman, liar and scoundrel to the end, had only got his deserts.

"Don't fire," he said at last. "We can't even send a squad to pursue him. They'd have no chance to overtake him on that horse with anything in the army. Well, I'll send the report to the territorial governor and leave him to deal with him."

"Well, I never!" began Mrs. Canby, her great surprise at last finding expression.

"Did you notice, Colonel Bonham," asked Bo-

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nita triumphantly, "that he was on my horse, Cochise?"

"Yes," assured Canby.

"And there won't be any troopers that can catch him!"

"I suppose not," admitted the Colonel. He turned to the officers. "Well, that's all, gentlemen. The inquiry is over. Rejoin your command and get ready for the march. Sergeant Kellar, pending inquiry, you are reduced to the ranks. Hallock, get a copy of those minutes ready for the Sheriff of the county, and another copy for the Department at the first opportunity."

"Yes, sir," said Hallock, taking his notes and following the others out of the gate.

"Denton," said the Colonel, "I am glad this officer's death will not be laid at your door. Orderly, my horse. I'll be back in a moment," said the Colonel, going into the house. "I wish to see for myself Hodgman's condition."

"Mr. Denton," said Estrella.

"Mrs. Bonham," answered Denton, saluting.

"I want to speak with you and my — the Colonel — before he goes," said Estrella hurriedly.

"Estrella, what is it?" asked Bonita, all her jealousy not yet quieted it seemed.

"Mr. Canby," said the Colonel formally as he came back into the courtyard, "Captain Hodgman can not live. He is unconscious. He is therefore unable to correct his — blunder. I don't know how long he will last. But I will leave a detail to watch him and in the end to wire his people to consult their wishes."

"I'll attend to it," said Canby promptly. "You can take all your men with you and —"

"Very good; Doctor Fenlon will give you the address of his people, and he and Miss MacCullagh will follow the regiment on the next train. You'll send them down to the station?"

"All right, and I'll send a wire to his folks at once," said Canby.

The Colonel hesitated. He glanced at his wife, he nodded to the rest, he started slowly out of the patio, disregarding Estrella's pleading glance and outstretched hand. The play had been played out so far as he was concerned. The whole thing was over. There was nothing left for him but to take up the march to Florida and Cuba, and God only knew what was beyond. It would be a fitting close to a long and brilliant career in the service of his country, it seemed to him, if some Spanish bullet accounted for him. Life without Estrella

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was no longer sweet and to die like a soldier would be to make a fitting end. He did not yet know all. But he knew enough, and he really did not care for any further enlightenment.

But Mrs. Canby was not minded to let the moment pass without fuller explanations. Her daughter's appeal was seconded by her own desire and determination.

"Colonel Bonham," she began.

"Yes?" answered the Colonel, pausing impatiently.

"You said that Captain Hodgman lied."

The Colonel bowed. Mrs. Canby stared hard at him.

"I want to know if he really did," she asked.

The Colonel returned her look with interest. He weighed his words carefully and finally made this measured reply,

"I assure you that the cause of Mr. Denton's resignation was not that given by that dying officer."

He spoke with a finality that left no room for doubt in the minds of his hearers. He turned as if to go out again and then thought better of it, for he came back and faced the young man.

"Captain Denton," he said, "I want you to

believe that I have never spoken to any one on earth concerning the facts connected with your resignation."

"I do believe that, sir," answered Denton promptly and honestly.

"Well, let me get into this game," said old Canby. "What was the real cause for Denton's leavin' the army? I ask it in his presence because he has asked to marry my daughter Bonita."

"It was a matter personal to him," answered the Colonel, "and of which I will not speak."

"Look here," said Canby, "if it was any nonsense" — he stopped and then went on resolutely — "with — Estrella, I want you to say so. I have a right to know."

The answer fell falteringly from the Colonel's lips slowly word by word.

"It — was — not — that."

"Well, that's all right so far as it goes," said Canby, "but I want to know something more. That it was nothin' agin his honour, nothin' that should make the little one ashamed for lovin' him," continued the big rancher as the Colonel stood as silent as had been the prisoners he had interrogated before. "She's the sister of your wife,

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Colonel," he said pleadingly. "An' I ask you to answer."

And that suggested to the Colonel a way out. It wasn't his affair, it was more her sister's. He turned to her with the faintest shadow of a bow.

"Bonita's sister," he said, "knows all of the circumstances; all that I know, she knows. Bonita's happiness more nearly concerns her than it does me and she will have to tell you whatever she wishes, whatever you wish to know. Good-bye."

He turned squarely on his heel, this time determined to break away. But fate had not yet dealt him all the blows he was to sustain. His wife had stood almost in a daze while she fought with herself and summoned her courage to the point of complete confession, and now she stepped swiftly forward.

"Frank," she cried, "wait."

The Colonel stopped again.

"I will tell them," she went on, "and you shall hear me. Father, my husband did find Mr. Denton in our drawing room late at night and — I was there, too."

"Good God!" exclaimed old Canby, starting forward while a low sound broke from Bonita's lips, a murmur incredulous yet anguished.

"It is not what you think," said Estrella, not

daring to stop, finding it fearfully hard and yet with a sense of relief, as if a load were slipping from her shoulders, growing greater with every word. "I was going away."

"Estrella!" exclaimed her sister.

"But not with him, but with Hodgman. Denton came there to prevent it. He found it out through a letter I had dropped that Lena picked up and gave to him. He took from Captain Hodgman my jewels which I had given him and which, with the thing they stood for, were all of me that he cared for, and he told him to go. Then I heard—the Colonel"—she could not pronounce his name again apparently—"returning. In that terrible moment, I knew that I loved my husband, and him alone. I had made a frightful mistake. I prayed and hoped to keep him from learning what I had done. I made Mr. Denton go back of the curtain. He didn't want to go. It seems that Captain Hodgman met my husband on his way back and told him Denton was in the house. The Colonel said, so. I denied he was there. My husband discovered Mr. Denton guiltily hiding, as he thought. He jumped to the conclusion that I was going away with him. Denton said that I had not known of his presence. When he was arrested


and searched, my jewels were found on him. He had put them in his jacket when I thrust him behind the curtain. Sergeant Kellar concealed the letter from Captain Hodgman to me planning our flight, but he couldn't hide the jewels. The fact that Denton had the packet and that he was in hiding explained Denton's presence, and without believing Denton's protestations, my husband called him a thief, and demanded his resignation. And to protect me, to protect a woman's honour, that he might give her a chance to repair the wrong, to make amends, to retain her husband's love, Denton submitted to the awful charge. He wrote out his resignation then and there. He went away in disgrace like the gallant gentleman that he is. Oh, Denton," cried the woman, turning to him and stretching out her hands, "I thank you, I thank you with all my broken heart. But it was all in vain. From that day my husband has distrusted me, me —" she threw up her hands hysterically "— not you. He knew in his heart that you couldn't steal, but he couldn't know in his heart, he doesn't know in his heart even now, that I love him and him only and that I am punished, punished as only a woman can understand."

Estrella Bonham shot one look at the hard iron face of the veteran Colonel. She saw no encour-

agement there. She had tried and failed. Hope was dead. The strength that had sustained her through this awful ordeal suddenly abandoned her. She was standing by the table. She sank down on her knees by it and put her head into her hands, her eyes dry and burning, her throat choked with sobs. The rose that Bonita had given her, disarranged by her sudden movement, fell upon the pavement of the courtyard and lay there, red like a drop of blood from her breaking heart.

Her confession was received in ghastly silence for a moment. It was Bonita who recovered herself first. She made a swift movement as if to step to her sister's side but the old rancher stopped her. He rose to the situation. Waving back the others, he stepped slowly to the side of the wretched woman. His big rough hand fell tenderly on her bended head.

"Gentlemen," he said with strange dignity and power, "from the minute they put on long dresses, I reckon every father fears that a moment like this may come to him. We've been uncommon proud of 'Strella. Ma and me have throwed out our chests an' stepped high. It seems like she's mixed it up a little now, but there ain't any trouble comin' to her that her old Gov'nor ain't goin' to divide."



He stooped down, he put his arms around the slender figure, he lifted up the woman and pressed her close to his big heart. Towering over the bended head he looked movingly at the Colonel, his lips working a little. Canby could be iron hard, too, but there was an unwonted tenderness in his bearing and his language, albeit a bit of defiance was there also. The Colonel could not bring himself to speak. It had been Hodgman after all. He knew it had and he had wronged Denton grievously, terribly. Denton had sought to do him the greatest favour and in doing it had sustained almost the greatest disgrace possible to man. A wild pang of fierce jealousy shot through him at the sight of Estrella on her father's breast. Why! she should be in his arms, not Canby's. Yet he could not bring himself to speak, much less to take her. He did not know what he would say if he relaxed.

"I know that it's your say, Colonel," continued the level voice of the old rancher — and really he looked older than he ever did in all his life, thought Denton, watching him — "I see you're turnin' it over in your mind. I want you to do that," he continued sagely. "I want you to turn it over before you talk any. This is no time for words in haste."

Yes, the Colonel was turning it over in his mind, trying, trying, trying to focus his thoughts on the right course. Mr. Hallock came rapidly through the gate and saluted.

"Everything is ready, Colonel."

The Colonel mechanically answered the salute. Why should he say anything? What was there to say? He turned slowly. He took a slow step toward the young officer, who stood puzzled by the tragedy in the air which he could feel without understanding. But he was not to be allowed to go in that way. Bonita, loving Estrella as never before, interposed.

"Colonel Bonham," she said sharply, "you must speak with my sister."

Yes, he must. It wasn't manly, it wasn't soldierly, it wasn't the part of a husband who was worthy of the name to dodge issues like that. The Colonel nodded to the expectant lieutenant.

"Tell Captain Cochran to start the battalion at once," he said. "Go slowly, I'll overtake you."

Mr. Hallock saluted and, glad to escape from the scene of tragedy, went rapidly out of the gate.

"You never danced with her," said Bonita almost hysterically. "You never took her to the towns. She was young. She wanted pleasure. You put her into the hands of other people. You

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stayed always at headquarters, working. Was that right? Isn't it partly your fault? Don't put all the blame on her."

Across the silent courtyard came the call of the bugle, faint and far. The troops were moving. The war had begun. The minutes were fleeting. Grim and stern and white-faced, the Colonel turned to Denton.

"The letter," he said, "that was on you when Kellar arrested you —"

His voice was almost judicial in its calm. Never had he had a greater mastery over himself than then. And in the same impersonal tone, Denton, taking his cue from his former commander, answered him.

"Sergeant Kellar returned it to me after my resignation and I sent it back to Mrs. Bonham."

Estrella lifted her face from her father's shoulder.

"I have it," she said. "I have kept it for you."

"And you first got it, how?" asked the Colonel of Denton.

"From Kellar. Lena had given it to him."

Lena stood in the background, hovering near, wishing to be of assistance and yet unable. The Colonel looked hard at her.

"I saw Captain Hodgman give it to Mrs. Bonham. When she dropped it, I picked it up, sir," she said.

What more was there to be said? It was Denton who made the next effort.

"Colonel Bonham," he said, "I have reason to believe that after that night Mrs. Bonham never spoke alone to Captain Hodgman again."

"Never, never," whispered Estrella. "I loathe him."

"Mr. Canby," said the Colonel slowly, "I do not care to say anything now that later I may wish unsaid. I must join my regiment. I—I shall leave—" There was a long pause. "—Mrs. Bonham in your care till — till I return," he added slowly.

But would he ever return? Was he sure of it? Was he anxious to? Was anybody sure of it? Was anybody anxious that he should return? Was this good-bye forever? Were these cold words an eternal farewell?

"Frank," said the woman piteously.

She disengaged herself from her father's clasp and he let her go. It was up to her now. He had done all he could, she must do the rest. Indeed, the others stood silent, motionless, scarcely breathing as they watched the trio. His wife

walked over to him. Oh, if he would only show some human emotion, she thought. If she could only break that iron control, she prayed. His voice had faltered when he had committed her into her father's care but only for a moment.

"You're not a young man any longer," she continued. "There will be fever as well as war. You — you may not return."

"Worse fates than that may come to a soldier," said the Colonel sternly.

Indeed, he was a living example of it. He turned away from her.

"Don't go yet," she cried. "I must say more to you."

But he did not look in her direction. Her father took her in his arms again and her mother stepped to her side and caught the girl's hand.

"My boy," said the Colonel to the younger man. He slowly put out his hand and Denton instantly clasped it. The Colonel bit his lip. As he had been grievously wronged and suffered, so Denton had been grievously wronged and suffered. "Your father and I —" he said. "On the same horse — bang into Miles's dining room —"

"I know, sir," said Denton deeply moved, not able to control himself like the older, more experienced man.

The Colonel drew himself up.

"We're both going to the front. I'll wire the department, and you've got to rejoin the Eleventh."

"Why, Colonel!" exclaimed the young man, his face brightening.

"If it's only for one week. You will give an old man that chance of — reparation, won't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Denton quickly with a flash of inspiration. "And you'll give your wife the same kind of a chance, won't you?"

The words were well chosen, the thought a happy one. The Colonel was shaken. He passed his hand across his brow and turned to his wife. She came toward him, hands outstretched again. Was he not always to remember her with her little hands outstretched to him?

"Frank, Frank," she said, "I love you. Can't you see? Don't you know?"

She made as if to tear away the dress that covered her breast while she looked at him, that he might look within her heart and read her very soul.

"And this man?" asked the Colonel slowly, his voice breaking at last,— he pointed toward the house — "this man who is dying?"

"No — never," cried Estrella. "It was a

madness, a recoil from the dreariness of the desert, a woman too much alone. Can't you say one kind thing, one word of forgiveness?"

The Colonel looked at her, his grim face softened, the old look of tenderness and a new look of forgiveness slowly overspread it. Estrella had staked all upon the moment. She could do no more. She looked back at him and if ever truth, humility and devotion shone in a woman's face, they were in hers. Again, across the tense silence shot the faint yet clear note of the now more distant bugle. He must go. But he must forgive her.

"When I come back," he said tenderly.

He could trust himself to say no more. He turned away. His name burst from the woman's lips, his name choked out with a great sob. He stopped again. Bonita looked toward him entreatingly while Canby took the Colonel's wife, wretched, yet his soul alight with rays of hope upon the horizon, in his arms.

And there at her feet lay the great red rose that had fallen from her throat, that had dropped down across her heart. The Colonel stepped slowly toward it. He motioned Bonita back. He stooped down, he lifted the rose up as it had been the woman herself, he pressed it to his lips,

thrust it into the breast of his jacket, looked at her and in the look she found love, forgiveness and comfort to buoy her up and to sustain her through the long hours of anguished waiting until he came back after the wars to take her once more and forever into his life and into his heart; and then he was gone —

THE END

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